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BEHIND THE SHIELD-WALL: THE EXPERIENCE OF COMBAT IN LATE ANGLO-SAXON ENGLAND

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BEHIND THE SHIELD-WALL:
THE EXPERIENCE OF COMBAT IN
LATE ANGLO-SAXON ENGLAND

A Thesis
Presented to
the Graduate School
of Clemson University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts
History

by
Jordan M. Poss
August 2010

Accepted by:
Dr. Caroline Dunn, Committee Chair
Dr. Rod Andrew
Dr. Jerome V. Reel

ABSTRACT

Most studies of the Anglo-Saxon military examine its structural ties to economic and social structures, rarely investigating Anglo-Saxon battle itself. This paper asks the question “What was it *like* to have been in battle with the Anglo-Saxon army?” After introducing the topic in a study of the 991 Battle of Maldon and describing the development of the Anglo-Saxon military system between the fifth and eleventh centuries, this paper relies on case studies of the most thoroughly-documented Anglo-Saxon battles, those of 1066—Fulford Gate, Stamford Bridge, and Hastings—to reconstruct the conditions of Anglo-Saxon combat and their effects on the men who fought in them. Based on these reconstructions, the study asks the further question of what sustained men through such terrible combat. These case studies not only provide a ground-level view of important military events but suggest the depths to which ideas of lordship and personal loyalty permeated Anglo-Saxon society.

DEDICATION

To J.L. McKay

1932-1998

The first soldier I knew.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

*I would that you all hear my high descendance:
know that in Mercia I am of mighty kin.*

—Ælfwine in *The Battle of Maldon*

It would be impossible for me to thank every one of the people who have made me what I am and this paper what it is. A great deal of the latter are my teachers and professors, those who, noting my smoldering love of history in elementary school, fanned the flame and passed it on as it grew to those more capable of enduring its heat. At Tabernacle there was Mrs. Bourlet, at Victory Mr. Bagwell, at Bob Jones Drs. Hayner and Matzko, both of whom I owe tremendous debts, and here at Clemson the many kind and knowledgeable faculty members under whom I've sat—but especially my committee members, Drs. Dunn, Andrew, and Reel, who have supported and guided my sometimes painfully slow and temperamental work.

But with respect to those above, the lion's share of the credit—that is, for the more important consideration of who I am—goes to my friends and family. Of the hundreds of people I've met and befriended over twenty-six years and through four schools, Doug, Geide, Bean, the original Lousy Movie Night crew, and Alex are the ones who haven't fallen away. There are dozens more, but y'all are the best. My immense Southern family I thank as a whole, and my living grandparents, Nanny, Georgi, and Poppy, I thank specifically for their unconditional love as I remember the same about Papal, who taught me the term “ammo dump” and told me where Korea was. My siblings, Meredith and Nicolaus, deserve special praise for enduring my sometimes Ignatius

J. Reilly-like behavior growing up, and for being the best friends I could hope to share parents with.

Last and most important, I thank Mom and Dad. They made me keep reading when I stumbled furiously over *though*, *through*, *rough*, and *knight*; made me go to college when I was too lazy to want it; and, once I finally wanted to be there, pushed me on through times that would have tempted more serious students to quit. They even forced me to start liking hamburger as a kid. In other words, they've helped me even when I was too stupid to help myself, and everything I write, I write for them.

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ABBREVIATIONS

- ASC*, A 991 (126) *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, ms. A, chronicle year, page number in Swanton, Ed.
- EHD*, Vol. I *English Historical Documents*, Vol. I, Dorothy Whitelock, Ed.
- EHD*, Vol. II *English Historical Documents*, Vol. II, David C. Douglas and George W. Greenaway, Eds.

Introduction:

The Inside of History

Too many people learn about war with no inconvenience to themselves.

—Guy Sajer¹

Writing in 1925 of the deep moral and religious roots of the conflict between Rome and Carthage, *litterateur* G.K. Chesterton introduced, in passing, a remarkable concept for the writing of history. The passage, intended as a corrective to the half-century of Rankean scientific history up to that point, is worth quoting at length.

No wise man will wish to bring more long words into the world. But it may be allowable to say that we need a new thing; which may be called psychological history. I mean the consideration of what things meant in the mind of a man, especially an ordinary man; as distinct from what is defined or deduced merely from official forms or political pronouncements. . . . It is not enough to be told that a tom-cat was called a totem . . . We want to know what it felt like. . . . What did soldiers feel . . . ? What did vassals feel . . . ? So long as we neglect this subjective side of history, which may be more simply called the inside of history, there will always be a certain limitation on that science which can be better transcended by art. So long as the historian cannot do that, fiction will be truer than fact. There will be more reality in a novel; yes, even in a historical novel.²

None of this is to be confused with so-called psychohistory of the sort popular in the middle of the century, nor with more Foucauldian or postmodern strains which divine in every act a symbol. Rejecting—for this purpose—purely top-down models of history, Chesterton argued instead that ordinary people, especially in the throes of warfare, have no interest in matters of policy or whether they will enjoy the ultimate political benefits of

¹ Guy Sajer, *The Forgotten Soldier* (Dulles, Virginia: Potomac Books, 1971), 223.

² G.K. Chesterton, *The Everlasting Man* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1925), 139.

a war.³ Rejecting also the then-burgeoning economic-determinist ideas of Marxism, he mentioned, tongue planted firmly in cheek, that “Nero could not hire a hundred Christians to be eaten by lions at a shilling per hour. . . . Materialist history is the most madly incredible of all histories, or even of all romances.”⁴ What Chesterton called for was, above all, a history of ideas, those ideas important enough to hate and die for, how those ideas played out in the real world, and how the real world changed those ideas.

While British historians continued to puzzle over the fyrd into the last decades of the twentieth century, military historians attacked their subjects from new angles. In his groundbreaking work *The Face of Battle*, John Keegan attempted precisely the kind of history for which Chesterton had argued fifty years before. “Historians,” Keegan wrote, “traditionally and rightly, are expected to ride their feelings on a tighter rein than the man of letters [Chesterton, for example] can allow himself.” Citing *The British Official History of the First World War* as an example, Keegan wrote that “One school of historians at least . . . have achieved the remarkable feat of writing an exhaustive account of one of the world’s greatest tragedies without the display of any emotion at all.”⁵

Whether Keegan intended it or not, he had happened onto precisely the variety of history advocated by Chesterton. Many passages in *The Face of Battle* seem to echo Chesterton’s book, since Chesterton explicitly argued that nowhere “is this new history needed so much as in the psychology of war. Our history is stiff with official documents, public or private, which tell us nothing of the thing itself. . . . Why do the fighters fight?

³ Ibid, 141; cf. his comments on p. 140: “Does anybody in the world believe that a soldier says, ‘My leg is nearly dropping off, but I shall go on till it drops; for after all I shall enjoy all the advantages of my government obtaining a warm-water port in the Gulf of Finland.’”

⁴ Ibid, 140.

⁵ John Keegan, *The Face of Battle* (New York: Penguin, 1976), 29.

What is the psychology that sustains the terrible and wonderful thing called a war?”⁶

But where Chesterton, as merely a forward scout for a new idea, could only argue for a new school of history and not describe its execution, Keegan grasped immediately what was required—not merely the careful selection and interpretation of evidence, but a sort of method-acting for historians:

Anecdote should certainly not be despised, let alone rejected by the historian. But it is only one of the stones to his hand. Others—reports, accounts, statistics, map-tracings, pictures and photographs and a mass of other impersonal material—will have to be coaxed to speak, and he ought also to get away from papers and walk about his subject wherever he can find traces of it on the ground. . . . I would also argue that military historians should spend as much time as they can with soldiers . . . because the quite chance observation of trivial incidents may illuminate his private understanding of all sorts of problems from the past which will otherwise almost certainly remain obscured.⁷

To this end Keegan looked not only to chroniclers and official histories, but to sociological studies, weather reports, personal stories, numerous visits to the battlefields, and mountains of eyewitness accounts. His book, a case study of three battles—Agincourt, Waterloo, and the Somme—separated widely by time but by very little geographical distance, sought above all to answer the question “How would *I* behave in a battle?”⁸ Through the aforementioned methods, Keegan attempted to recreate battle as it was experienced by the participants, from longbowmen at Agincourt to rifle-toting Tommies at the Somme. In a now famous phrase, the book was “a personal attempt to catch a glimpse of the face of battle.”⁹

⁶ Chesterton, 139-40.

⁷ Keegan, 32.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 16.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 77.

Other historians followed, gradually shifting focus from the top-down campaign history of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to, if not a bottom-up approach, at least an extremely experiential one. In his study of Greek infantry combat, Victor Davis Hanson described his goals in terms almost identical to those of Keegan—who, tellingly, wrote the introduction for the revised edition: “In this account of the fighting between infantry soldiers during the classical age in Greece, I have tried to suggest the environment of that battle experience and the unusual hardship and difficulty for the men who fought. I hope also to offer something more than a narrative description of blows given and received.”¹⁰ Like Keegan, Hanson investigated otherwise non-military sources such as lyric poetry and pottery in his research. But more so than Keegan, Hanson sought not only the experience—the face—of battle, but the significance of that experience—socially, politically, militarily, physically, emotionally.

The aim of this paper is to revisit late Anglo-Saxon combat, not to propound a new sequence of the events of Maldon, Stamford Bridge, or Hastings or to refight battles over contentious points—though that must inevitably occur in its place. Rather, this study aims first of all to discover what Anglo-Saxon combat was like—the physical conditions into which it placed the men fighting—and second to understand how those men could endure such combat. This study’s object, therefore, is to understand the experience of combat in the late Anglo-Saxon era and the significance to Anglo-Saxons of “the terrible and wonderful thing called a war.”¹¹

¹⁰ Victor Davis Hanson, *The Western Way of War: Infantry Battle in Classical Greece*, 2nd ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), xv.

¹¹ Chesterton, 140.

PRIMARY SOURCES

Historians investigating the Anglo-Saxon military are simultaneously blessed and cursed. Looking at the sheer quantity of available primary sources—especially compared to many other fields of early medieval history—they are tempted to rejoice at such plenty. They are tempted again when presented with the monumental secondary literature which has grown up around such material. Only gradually do these historians become aware that the mountains of secondary sources through which they are sifting should have been an ill omen—modern historians of the Anglo-Saxon military seldom agree on anything, precisely because of some of those problems outlined above and because of the sometimes scanty coverage of the primary sources. Medieval chroniclers were in the tricky habit of avoiding those facts modern minds most want to know.

But it is the works of those chroniclers which are most important to any study of the Anglo-Saxon period, and to this study doubly so. The *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, which existed in multiple versions throughout its history,¹² is simultaneously the most informative and most tantalizing of the English sources. Reasonably unbiased, the *Chronicle* consists of yearly records of events which range from painstakingly detailed to downright disappointing. English chroniclers of later provenance—such as Henry of Huntingdon, Florence of Worcester,¹³ and a host of anonymous chroniclers at abbeys across England—are useful for filling in gaps but must be treated with greater care since they wrote from now unknown sources sometimes centuries after the events they describe.

¹² For a detailed breakdown of the *Chronicle*'s multiple versions and the textual history of each, cf. Michael Swanton, ed., xxi-xxviii.

¹³ Florence of Worcester's work is sometimes ascribed to John of Worcester, another chronicler. For the purposes of this study, the author refers to Florence in order to avoid confusion in anyone given to comparing text, footnotes, and bibliography.

The Norman side of the English Channel produced a number of prolix chroniclers. The Normans were proud of their heritage and manly combat record—ranging from wars in France to Sicily, southern Italy, and, at the end of the eleventh century, the First Crusade—and they took great pains to record every glorious thing their people accomplished. Unfortunately, their unusually strong biases sometimes compromise their usefulness as sources. This is especially true in the case of the Norman Conquest of England. Norman writers, facing scrutiny from a Church increasingly intent on stamping out inter-Christian violence,¹⁴ had to justify their violent incursion into the British Isles and found a scapegoat in Harold Godwinson, whose “difficulties were easy to explain: he was an illegitimate usurper who had perjured himself.” Though now clearly untrue, the prevalence of such claims recorded by all Norman chroniclers should keep the modern historian wary of their intentions.¹⁵

Given this bias, the Norman chroniclers vary in quality from good to terrible. William of Poitiers, who wrote the *Gesta Guillelmi* within a decade of the Conquest, is a generally reliable source who was “least carried away by imagination” in his account of the Battle of Hastings.¹⁶ His *Gesta* is almost a secular hagiography of the Duke, prompting one modern historian to say that William’s “praise is often so absurdly obsequious that its effect on a modern reader is the opposite of what he intended—it makes the Duke himself seem a clown.”¹⁷ William certainly wrote with his audience in mind. But his close

¹⁴ Thomas F. Madden, *The New Concise History of the Crusades* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005), 6.

¹⁵ Richard Huscroft, *The Norman Conquest: A New Introduction* (Harlow, UK: Pearson Longman, 2009), 115–16.

¹⁶ R.H.C. Davis and Marjorie Chibnall in William of Poitiers, *Gesta Guillelmi*, trans. and ed. by R.H.C. Davis and Marjorie Chibnall (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1998), xxxv.

¹⁷ David Howarth, *1066: The Year of the Conquest* (New York: Penguin, 1978), 143.

knowledge of William the Conqueror's character, of the nature of Norman combat, his close relationship with participants in the Conquest, and the possibility of participation himself make his more militarily sober account extremely useful for the military historian even if his pro-Norman bias and henpecking of court rivals require caution on the part of the political historian.

On the other end of the spectrum is Guy, Bishop of Amiens, who composed a Latin epic on the Conquest, the now-fragmentary *Carmen de Hastingae Proelio*, within two years of Hastings. Where William of Poitiers is restrained and realistic in his treatment of battle, for Guy there are no giddy heights of imagination too ludicrous to scale. After the first "feigned flight" at Hastings, the cunning Normans slew ten thousand Englishmen.¹⁸ In the final assault, two thousand were killed, "not counting the other thousands beyond telling."¹⁹ William the Conqueror behaves with mythic vigor and aggression, fighting in tandem with Eustace of Boulogne until "[b]y the swords of both the field was cleared of English . . . As a waning wood falls to the strokes of the axe, so the forest of Englishmen was brought to nothing."²⁰ But despite Guy's sometimes excessive storytelling, the *Carmen* is still useful as a source for combat. Guy, who may have traveled with the Duke's army during the invasion, clearly knew the Norman military, its reaction to the stiff resistance of the English, and, most importantly, the Norman nobility's martial scuttlebutt.

Many later sources from both sides of the English Channel exist. Those of Norman extraction typically follow their forebears in praising William the Conqueror and

¹⁸ Guy of Amiens, *The Carmen de Hastingae Proelio*, ed. and trans. by Catherine Morton and Hope Muntz (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1972), 29.

¹⁹ Ibid, 37.

²⁰ Ibid, 35; indeed, Guy explicitly compares William to Hercules on p. 31.

denigrating Harold Godwinson and the army that followed him. By extension, they often view the English as militarily incompetent or in Guy of Amiens's phrase, "a race ignorant of war."²¹ Some later English chroniclers sought to redeem the English reputation. Florence of Worcester was particularly concerned with Harold Godwinson's memory, and Henry of Huntingdon, a clergyman of mixed Norman and Saxon parentage, wrote an account in which Hastings was a close battle tipped in favor of the victors by the chance death of the enemy commander.²² But by this time the actual fighting prowess—much less the experience of combat in the ranks—was a distant concern behind the rehabilitation of royal reputations, and the usefulness of these trans-Channel sources is accordingly uneven.

Of special significance to this study are sources from across other seas—the stories recorded in saga form by Norwegian and Icelandic writers. The Icelandic sagas were written from the twelfth century onwards and, with few exceptions, their authors are unknown. Topically diverse and varying greatly in length, the sagas primarily concern the lives of Viking Age Scandinavians, usually those settling and feuding in Iceland from 870 but just as often they retell stores of well-known heroes, raiders, and outlaws.²³

Information on the English military comes in snatches from these sources, which often allude to or describe journeys to the British Isles. *The Saga of the Jómsvíkings*, for instance, chiefly concerns a warrior band headquartered in the Oder estuary and their disastrous defeat in battle at Hjórunga Bay in 986. The saga also details the events leading up to the battle, and among the activities detailed in the saga are raids on the English coast.

²¹ Guy of Amiens, 25.

²² Henry of Huntingdon, *The History of the English People 1000-1154*, trans. by Diana Greenway (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1996), 27-28; on Henry's parents, cf. xiv.

²³ *The Sagas of Icelanders*, Örnólfur Thorsson, ed. (New York: Penguin, 2000), xv-xvii.

The saga writers set down their stories no earlier than two centuries after the events most of them described, and so the historian must walk circumspectly through the saga literature. The information contained in the sagas—at least where it relates to the known historical record—is sometimes of suspect quality. Though the authors of the sagas were well aware of the distance at which the events they described took place, they were not uncritical and attempted to back up their stories, often with references to physical evidence or contemporary world politics.²⁴

A case in point is Snorri Sturluson, one of the few saga writers whose name has survived. Snorri wrote at the beginning of the thirteenth century, and his magnum opus is the *Heimskringla*, a series of sixteen sagas collected as a history of Norway's kings from the legendary past to 1177. Among his subjects is King Harald Hardrada (r. 1047-66), who, with Earl Paul of Orkney and the exiled Tostig Godwinson, invaded Northumbria in 1066 and was killed at the Battle of Stamford Bridge.

This much has been confirmed by outside sources. But Snorri's account of the battles around York is detailed—and erroneous. It is clear from his version of the succession crisis of 1066 and the subsequent battles that he was hopelessly confused about the whole business.²⁵ But describing the English military was never the saga writers' purpose—their readers were the descendants of raiders and knew the dangers and military capabilities of the English well. As a result, the information one can glean from the sagas is often incidental and allusive, but carefully used, can offer insight into the English army's strengths.

²⁴ Ibid, xxvii.

²⁵ Snorri Sturluson, *Heimskringla: History of the Kings of Norway*, trans. by Lee M. Hollander (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1964), 642-5.

A rich but troublesome source for the military historian of this period is the Bayeux Tapestry.²⁶ This near-contemporary embroidered record of the Norman Conquest is simultaneously explicit and vague enough to spawn endless debate in Conquest literature. Its chief value to the military historian is as a pictorial record by contemporaries of William the Conqueror's Hastings campaign and the arms, armor, and manner of fighting of those involved. But even in this capacity the Tapestry is difficult, and numerous competing interpretations exist on sticky points, such as the presence of archers in the English army.²⁷ This study is based primarily on literary sources, but the Tapestry—and mainstream interpretations of its contents—will nonetheless play an important role.

Of especially great importance are poetic and literary sources like *The Battle of Maldon*, *Beowulf*, *Brunanburh*, and sources that mention warfare off-hand, such as riddles, sermons, and religious poetry. Anglo-Saxon literature overflows with references to armed conflict, swords, arms, wounds, warrior bands, and battles against foes foreign, native, and otherworldly. But underlying it all is the significance of the experience of battle to the English, which is the true focus of this paper.

²⁶ All citations of the Bayeux Tapestry in this study come from Wilson, David M., ed., *The Bayeux Tapestry* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1985), and are cited by plate number.

²⁷ There is, for example, the contentious issue of Harold Godwinson's death, traditionally interpreted from the Tapestry as having been an arrow shot into his eye. This view remains the consensus. For a variety of interpretations, cf. David Howarth, *1066: The Year of the Conquest* (New York: Penguin, 1977), 182-4; Jim Bradbury, *The Battle of Hastings* (Thrupp, UK: Sutton, 1998), 148-51; Andrew Bridgeford, *1066: The Hidden History in the Bayeux Tapestry* (New York: Walker & Company, 2004), 146-50; Edwin Tetlow, *The Enigma of Hastings* (Yardley, Pennsylvania: Westholme, 1972), 196; R. Allen Brown, "The Battle of Hastings," in Stephen Morillo, ed., *The Battle of Hastings: Sources and Interpretations* (Woodbridge, England: Boydell, 1996), 214; E.A. Freeman, excerpt from *The Norman Conquest* in Morillo, ed., 162-4.

Here Our Lord Lies:

Byrhtnoth and the Battle of Maldon

A man near to death is dealing directly with an absolute; it is nonsense to say he is concerned only with relative and remote complications that death in any case will end. If he is sustained by certain loyalties, they must be loyalties as simple as death.

—G.K. Chesterton¹

MALDON, ESSEX—991

It began with sails on the horizon and word of mouth. A fleet of Danish ships was in sight, having come from raids in the south. The Danes had raided Folkestone on the English Channel, site of a rich priory, then to the east at Sandwich, then Ipswich, and so on up the coast. Now they neared the mouth of the River Blackwater and the royal mint at Maldon. Rumor held that the Danes' ships numbered ninety-three.²

As the Danes rowed in from the open sea, Byrhtnoth, Ealdorman of Essex, prepared to resist them. Just three years before the Danes had attacked the mint at Watchet, and Goda, a thegn of Devonshire, had met them with an army. Despite the infamously furious onslaught of the Northmen, the English army held and the Danes, suffering heavier casualties than the English and less able to afford them, fell back.³ Among the English dead lay Streonwold, "a most brave thegn," and Goda. Both had "preferred to end their lives by a warlike death than to live in shame."⁴

A man like Byrhtnoth would give no less in battle if the need arose. Once he had

¹ G.K. Chesterton, *The Everlasting Man* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1925), 140.

² ASC, A 991 (126).

³ ASC, C 988 (125); Florence of Worcester, *The Chronicle of Florence of Worcester*, trans. Joseph Stevenson (London: Seeleys, 1853), 251.

⁴ *Life of St. Oswald, Archbishop of York*, in *EHD*, Vol. I, 843.

raised all the troops he could in the area, he moved along the south bank of the Blackwater until he faced Northey Island. The Danes had sailed as far up the river as possible and beached their ships on the island. Marshes and tidal flats surrounded Northey, which connected to the mainland only by a narrow causeway left exposed at low tide. The Vikings could sail no farther upriver—the shallows and rapidly narrowing riverbed were too dangerous. And now they found themselves facing the entire local *fyrð*, led by the highest-ranking nobleman in Essex himself.⁵

Byrhtnoth was still an impressive figure at his ancient age of over sixty. He stood six feet, nine inches tall and white hair streamed from beneath his helmet.⁶ Armored, he personally directed the organization of the troops before dismounting and sending his horse to the rear with the rest of the army's train. He took his place with the picked men of his own retinue in the front rank,

*where he loved best to be
and was held most at heart – among hearth-companions.*⁷

Then, with his men prepared for battle and eager for a fight, Byrhtnoth waited. His swift response to the arrival of the Vikings and the geography of the area had given him a distinct advantage. With Byrhtnoth's troops so close, the Danes could either give battle, attacking his forces across the narrow footpath from the island, bottlenecking and risking annihilation, or they could slip quietly away and seek their fortunes elsewhere.

But despite the force lined up on the shore waiting only for the low-tide causeway to appear, the Vikings were supremely confident. A Danish spokesman appeared on the

⁵ Michael Alexander, ed., *The Earliest English Poems*, 3rd ed. (New York: Penguin, 1991), 100.

⁶ Letter of G.V. Gordon quoted in Alexander, 131n.; *Life of St. Oswald*, 843.

⁷ *The Battle of Maldon*, in Alexander, 102.

opposite beach and called across the rushing tidal waters. He first admonished the army as a whole to bring “rings, bracelets” to appease the raiding fleet. It would be better for the English not to cross swords with the Danes, he said, but “for a gold tribute a truce is struck.” The rest of the message was directed to Byrhtnoth, and promised Danish political friendship for tribute.⁸

The offer—one which these Vikings would repeatedly make during this year—was meant to entice, but Byrhtnoth would have none of it. Enraged⁹ by such typical Scandinavian hubris, the ealdorman brandished his weapons and replied,

*Spears shall be all the tribute [we] send you. . .
Spokesman for scavengers, go speak this back again,
bear your tribe a bitterer tale:
that there stands here ‘mid his men not the meanest of earls,
pledged to fight in this land’s defence,
the land of Aethelred, my liege lord,
its soil, its folk. . .
But English silver is not so swiftly won:
first iron and edge shall make arbitrement,
harsh war-trial, ere we yield tribute.¹⁰*

His rejection of terms with the Danes was total. Again, he waited.

The tide ebbed and the causeway appeared. Byrhtnoth bade one of his thegns—Wulfstan by name, of a proud warrior lineage—guard the causeway as the Danes formed up to attack. Wulfstan and two other warriors took up their weapons and stepped into the natural bottleneck. When the Vikings approached, Wulfstan thrust his spear into the first man to come close enough. The Dane fell dead. Doubtless the Vikings pressed hard on the three warriors, but the men refused to give ground. Their defense was so determined

⁸ Ibid, 102-3.

⁹ Byrhtnoth speaks *yrre and anræd*, or angry and firm. *Anræd*, meaning literally “one-minded,” connotes resolution and firmness. Alexander translates the passage “Stiff with anger” (103).

¹⁰ Ibid, 103.

that the Danes gave up and, resorting again to a spokesman, asked for safe passage to ground of their choosing.

Byrhtnoth, “overswayed by his heart’s arrogance” or “in foolhardy pride,” granted the Danes’ request.¹¹

The English gave them space and the Danes redeployed. They crossed the causeway, some carrying their arms and armor overhead to keep them out of the shallow water. Meanwhile, Byrhtnoth ordered his men to form a shield-wall. They closed ranks and each man overlapped his shield with the men beside him. The Danes followed suit. The two armies now formed twin shield-walls, facing one another on the shores of the river. The two sides taunted each other and the battle began.

The long lines of wooden shields crashed against each other. Spearmen thrust against the shields hoping for a gap. Archers lofted arrows into the ranks on both sides. In the deafening press at the center of the battle, Anglo-Saxons with swords, axes, and spears pushed, shoved, and hacked at similarly-armed Vikings. A Dane struck down Byrhtnoth’s nephew and one of the ealdorman’s men killed the Viking in turn. Byrhtnoth, “when a breathing space came,” thanked the man and fought on.¹²

The two sides kept at it. Bodies accumulated underfoot. Byrhtnoth shouted encouragement to those men who could hear him. Then, out of the chaos surrounding the two heaving lines of shields, a Viking thrust his spear at the ealdorman. Byrhtnoth

¹¹ Ibid, 104; *The Battle of Maldon* in Kevin Crossley-Holland, ed., *The Anglo-Saxon World: An Anthology* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1982), 13. The Anglo-Saxon phrase is *for his ofermode*, and could be translated “on account of his high-mindedness.” *Ofermod* means *pride* and connotes insolence or disdain. The same word is used three times to refer to Satan in the Anglo-Saxon *Genesis*. Cf. *Genesis*, A, B, Georgetown University, <http://www8.georgetown.edu/departments/medieval/labyrinth/library/oe/texts/a1.1.html>, ll. 262, 273, 338, or the modern English prose translation at the Online Medieval & Classical Library, <http://omacl.org/Junius/genesis.html>.

¹² *The Battle of Maldon*, in Alexander, 105.

parried, broke the spearhead from the shaft and killed his attacker. But no sooner had he dispatched the Viking than

*Flashed a dart from Danish hand,
fist-driven, and flew too truly,
bit the Earl, Aethelred's thane.*¹³

Byrhtnoth's retainers ran to their wounded lord. One pulled the spear from his wound and threw it into the Danish throng. Unable to wield his spear, Byrhtnoth drew his sword, but even that he was too weak to raise. The Danes swiftly surrounded him and the two men defending him. They hacked them to pieces.

Almost as steadfastly as it had resisted to that point, Byrhtnoth's army disintegrated. Forgetting Byrhtnoth's past benevolence, many of his followers fled to the woods. One leapt onto Byrhtnoth's own horse and rode hard from the field. His brothers trailed behind him on foot.

Only those men closest to the ealdorman remained, and "[p]roudly those thanes pressed forward."¹⁴ Speaking words of encouragement to each other and making heroic boasts that they would not give way, Byrhtnoth's hearth-companions held formation and waded into the enemy. Even the elderly Bryhtwold, "though . . . white with winters," vowed to stay behind and die defending the body of his lord.¹⁵ Another warrior, Dunnere, spoke for all of them when he

*called out over all:
'A man cannot linger when his lord lies
unavenged among Vikings, cannot value breath.'*¹⁶

¹³ Ibid, 106.

¹⁴ Ibid, 107.

¹⁵ Ibid, 111.

¹⁶ Ibid, 109.

The men fought furiously, some of them breaking through the Danish shield-wall to wreak havoc in the rear before falling themselves. The Vikings “in war-whetted anger” pressed harder.¹⁷ Each of the Englishmen shouted and stirred the others—many of whom were brothers or kinsmen—to fight on. One by one the Vikings cut them down. By the end of the day, all of Byrhtnoth’s faithful men lay dead beside him. The Vikings, though bloodied, “had possession of the place of slaughter”¹⁸ and, when at last they left, took the tenacious ealdorman’s head with them.¹⁹

BOG BODIES AND ANGLO-SAXON COMBAT

The Battle of Maldon, that single bloody day in August 991, illustrates vividly many of the special issues of Anglo-Saxon military history. The history of early medieval England is shot through with blind spots and areas in which maybes and conjectures must sometimes suffice. This is especially true of its military history. “No matter with which we have to deal,” one historian has written, “is darker than the constitution of the English army on the eve of its defeat.”²⁰ Indeed, the very difficulty of the field is a subject of jokes among some of its devotees. Quoting an anonymous reviewer of one of his works, C. Warren Hollister said that “I do not think that whoever advised the author to turn to the Anglo-Saxon army was being very kind. Never was there a more treacherous bog than this.”²¹

But bog-men sometimes emerge from such swamps, and just such a thing is the

¹⁷ Ibid, 110.

¹⁸ *ASC*, A 991 (126).

¹⁹ Alexander, 131n.

²⁰ Frederic William Maitland, *Domesday Book and Beyond: Three Essays in the Early History of England* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1907), 156.

²¹ C. Warren Hollister, *Anglo-Saxon Military Institutions on the Eve of the Norman Conquest*, (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1962), vii.

Battle of Maldon. The battle is recorded in all three versions of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, from which one learns that the Viking leader was no less than Olaf Tryggvason, future King of Norway.²² Maldon also receives mention in *The Life of St. Oswald*, a anonymous hagiographic text written within a decade of the battle, from which one learns that the Vikings, depleted by a Pyrrhic victory, could barely man their ships for the voyage away from Maldon.²³ But the events on this battlefield “would be no more than a dim episode in a monotonous succession of disasters were it not for the great poem which describes the death of Byrhtnoth . . . in a battle against the raiders.”²⁴

The Battle of Maldon is a fragmentary poem in the Anglo-Saxon heroic epic form. Just over 300 lines remain, and the original manuscript was lost to fire centuries ago. The poem, which begins with Byrhtnoth arranging his troops and ends as the last of his retainers are laid low, is apparently the work of someone with very close ties to eyewitnesses. It is even safe to surmise—as many have—that he may have been a participant in the battle.²⁵

But if the poem’s unusual provenance and miraculously accidental survival do not lend it the air of a bog-man, its vivid, almost tactile look directly into the past should. The poem gives the reader, who has, so far, had only the “Here Ealdorman Byrhtnoth was killed at Maldon”²⁶ of the *Chronicle* to go by an image of the man, of the field where the battle took place, and of the time wasted debating with enemies and waiting on the tide. The poem includes such minor but realistic details as the fact, quoted above, that

²² ASC, A, F, and E 991 (126); see also 126n.

²³ *Life of St. Oswald, Archbishop of York*, 839n, 843.

²⁴ Frank Stenton, *Anglo-Saxon England*, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1971), 376.

²⁵ Cf. Crossley-Holland, 5; and Alexander, 99.

²⁶ ASC, F 991 (126).

Byrhtnoth had to wait for a “breathing space” before thanking an ally. *The Battle of Maldon* is remarkable not only as a stirring, violent, but also pathos-filled account of war and death, but as a brawny articulation of Germanic codes of valor and lordship held over from the post-Roman era. “The heroic ethic,” wrote one scholar, “is presented in Maldon in all its integrity: in these unpretentious, still-regular verses it receives its clearest and most convincing expression.”²⁷

Many aspects of the Anglo-Saxon military must remain a mystery because they have no *Battle of Maldon* to step out of the bog and illuminate them. How, for instance, did Byrhtnoth go about raising his army? How did the make-up of his army reflect local political or social structures? Historians of the twentieth century spent enormous amounts of time and effort in attempting to sift from the available evidence the composition and organization of the *fyrð*, the Anglo-Saxon levy. The result has been remarkable strides in understanding, for instance, the “great” and “select” fyrds raised at different times by different leaders, and the role in political and social organization that the fyrd played in Anglo-Saxon life. But the sources still impose limits on the extent to which historians can reconstruct or, more importantly, understand this subject.

Less attention has been given to the act of battle itself—the experience of bearing arms against an armed enemy. Many studies give attention to battles, but rarely to *battle* and the effect it had on the participants beyond mere victory or defeat. This state is unfortunate because, even if modern history will never uncover some of the fyrd’s more arcane sociological secrets, the sources burst with information on what the men who wrote them experienced and felt in the jaws of combat. From works like *The Battle of*

²⁷ Alexander, 101.

Maldon one gets a glimpse of what may have been on the minds of men at the scene.²⁸

²⁸ This chapter's title, for instance, comes from another bald statement of the heroic code and bonds of loyalty to one's lord in *Maldon*: "Courage shall grow keener, clearer the will, / the heart fiercer, as our force faileth. / Here our lord lies levelled in the dust, / the man all marred: he shall mourn to the end / who thinks to wend off from this war-play now." Alexander, 111.

Drab Stupidity:

Anglo-Saxon Warfare in Context

In the West during the Middle Ages the spirit of feudal chivalry was inimical to military art, though the drab stupidity of its military course is lightened by a few bright gleams—no fewer, perhaps, in proportion, than at any other period in history.

—B.H. Liddell Hart¹

THE ANGLO-SAXONS IN MILITARY HISTORY

The English army of the Anglo-Saxon period fought almost exclusively on foot, as infantry in close formations.² A modern strategist like Liddell Hart, whose career was built upon championing the tank, may be forgiven for finding massed infantry boring, but to write off the entire military development of the Middle Ages in one small chapter of a massive book—and in such cavalier manner—seems obtuse at best. The Anglo-Saxon army was an important link in a long chain of infantry-dominated armies stretching from the ancient world to the modern era.³

Where Liddell Hart saw the medieval era as a Gibbonian morass between periods of enlightenment, more careful and studious historians have found continuity with the ancient world. In his case study of the 732 Battle of Poitiers, Victor Davis Hanson stressed medieval Europe's continued reliance on heavy infantry. Though Europe of the Early Middle Ages was a shatter zone of petty kingdoms secured against each other by raiding

¹ B.H. Liddell Hart, *Strategy*, 2nd ed. (New York: Meridian, 1954), 55.

² The Anglo-Saxon army rode to battle and dismounted to fight, remounting to harry or pursue fleeing enemies, always with deadly results. Cf. the account of Anglo-Saxon victory at *Brunanburh* in Alexander, 96; and § “Flight” in ch. 4, below.

³ Cf. Victor Davis Hanson on the Carolingian army at the Battle of Poitiers, *Carnage and Culture: Landmark Battles in the Rise of Western Power* (New York: Anchor Books, 2001), 158.

and fortified outposts, the Western tradition of disciplined infantry continued as the basic necessity for making war.⁴ Furthermore, and perhaps more importantly for this study, medieval Europeans inherited from the classical world the overwhelming desire for decisive battle.

Decisive battle, “the idea . . . that men would seek their enemy face-to-face, in a daylight collision of armies, without ruse or ambush, with the clear intention to destroy utterly the army across the plain or die honorably in the process,” originated among the Greeks shortly after the Greek Dark Ages and “was *not* found earlier or elsewhere.”⁵ The wars of the ancient Mesopotamian kingdoms and Egypt had essentially been skirmishes on a massive scale, characterized by delaying tactics, hit-and-run raids, missile troops, and lightly armed skirmishers, all of which the Greeks regarded with scorn as “[t]he policy . . . of bandits and thieves.”⁶

The object of decisive battle was to destroy not only the enemy’s will but his ability to resist. This ethos carried over to the Romans, whose “ferocity” and “pursuit of victory [were] relentless.” Though the Romans expanded through diplomacy as well as military conquest, resistance to Roman overtures guaranteed war, which would end only when the enemy had “ceased to possess the capacity to wage war against” Rome. Enemies who declined decision on the battlefield faced atrocity, making them an object lesson of the Roman belief that gaining victory permitted anything.⁷

⁴ Ibid, 150.

⁵ Ibid, 92.

⁶ Ibid, 94; Victor Davis Hanson, *The Western Way of War: Infantry Battle in Classical Greece*, 2nd ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), 14-15.

⁷ Adrian Goldsworthy, *Roman Warfare* (London: Cassell, 2002), 24-6; on Roman ferocity specifically, cf. John Keegan, *A History of Warfare* (New York: Vintage, 1993), 265-6.

Both the Greeks and Romans fought primarily as infantry armies. The hoplite and the legionnaire fought in disciplined ranks that sought out a “fair”—meaning pitched and agreed upon—fight. Cavalry were numerous but marginal. Horsemen of the ancient world lacked the equipment necessary for the shock charge, and were usually relegated to fast but usually unsuccessful flanking maneuvers or the prevention of the same by enemy cavalry. Most of Rome’s enemies counted their strength in infantry as well, especially the Germanic tribes of the Rhine and Danube frontier.⁸ These tribes already possessed a tradition of “face-to-face fighting with edged weapons, a tradition reinforced by their encounters with the Roman armies.”⁹

To sweep quickly over Rome’s long decline and fall, three major changes took place that reoriented European warfare. First, Christianity arose and eventually became the dominant religion of Europe, and the Church began to outline further rules for warfare beyond those principles inherited from the Greeks, dictating acceptable targets and eventually acceptable days for fighting. Atrociousness of the Roman variety, for instance, was anathema to Christian ideas of charity and the intrinsic wrongness of extinguishing human life.¹⁰

The other two changes, while more or less contemporary with one another, are only directly related as they later affected the Anglo-Saxons. Second, while its origins are best left unargued here, the stirrup appeared in western Europe, making shock cavalry a

⁸ Cf. Tacitus, *The Agricola and The Germania*, trans. H. Mattingly, revised by S.A. Handford (New York: Penguin, 1970), 106.

⁹ Keegan, *A History of Warfare*, 285.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, 193, 289-90.

possibility for the first time.¹¹ The subsequent development of stabilizing saddles would make shock cavalry, armored knights that could ride into an enemy with “the combined weight of horse and rider behind [them],” a reality in the High Middle Ages.¹² Finally, the reign of Charlemagne consolidated the scattered Frankish enclaves across Europe and regularized the way in which they waged war. “[F]rom that time on,” Ewart Oakeshott wrote, these loosely-related peoples “developed according to the same pattern . . . of religion and art and letters and military usage.”¹³

Charlemagne’s power lay in his military, which now “resembled the Roman army . . . not at all.”¹⁴ The most telling and important difference between the Carolingian and Roman armies was Charlemagne’s rapidly increasing reliance on cavalry.¹⁵ The lords of Charlemagne’s empire quickly embraced the possibilities offered by mounted combat, though these new military developments did not immediately lead to the domination of the battlefield by knights.¹⁶ Hollywood’s unstoppable, tank-like armored knight of the Dark Ages was neither as plentiful nor as decisive a combatant as legend suggests. Despite Charlemagne’s pride and heavy investment in cavalry, Carolingian battles—such as Poitiers—were most often decided by the infantry, and infantry outnumbered horsemen

¹¹ On the origin of the stirrup, cf. Keegan, *A History of Warfare*, 285-6; Kelly DeVries, *Medieval Military Technology* (Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview Press, 1992), 100-1; R. Ewart Oakeshott, *The Archaeology of Weapons: Arms and Armour from Prehistory to the Age of Chivalry* (London: Lutterworth Press, 1960), 86; Antonio Santosuosso, *Barbarians, Marauders, and Infidels: The Ways of Medieval Warfare* (New York: MJF Books, 2004), 68-9.

¹² Andrew Ayton, “Arms, Armour, and Horses,” in Maurice Keen, ed. *Medieval Warfare: A History* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1999), 188.

¹³ R. Ewart Oakeshott, *The Archaeology of Weapons: Arms and Armour from Prehistory to the Age of Chivalry* (London: Lutterworth Press, 1960), 164.

¹⁴ Keegan, *A History of Warfare*, 284.

¹⁵ Oakeshott, 167.

¹⁶ Ayton, 188.

throughout the Middle Ages by five to one.¹⁷

The important fact about Charlemagne's era, for this study, is that pointed out by Oakeshott—the consolidation of western Europe and the direction of its military development toward the emergence of shock cavalry. For the next several centuries, the nobility of western Europe would adopt warfare from horseback and cultivate it to a high art. The exceptions to this trend, those regions that would develop outside the Carolingian laboratory, were found in “the Visigothic remnant in Spain,” the ship-borne infantry raiders of Scandinavia, and Anglo-Saxon England.¹⁸

A BRIEF HISTORY OF ANGLO-SAXON WARFARE

At its strongest, the Anglo-Saxon military stood at the height of six-hundred years of development spurred by invasion, raid, battle, defeat, and victory. This six-century process divides into three distinct phases marked by the influence of one figure who, directly or not, changed the way of Anglo-Saxon war. The first phase was the isolation of the Angles and Saxons from the continent and their warfare with the Romano-British. The second began with the Viking invasions and reached its climax with Alfred the Great, who guided the Anglo-Saxon military into a course in which it would remain, with little deviation, until the eleventh century. The final phase is marked by the ascent of the Danish king Cnut, who introduced a final change to the English military that would make it into the system faced by the Norse and Normans in 1066.

A British warlord opened the first phase. This man stands in the thickest fog of late

¹⁷ Hanson, *Carnage and Culture*, 163, 157. The ratio of infantry to cavalry was often even higher, even in the knight-dominated High Middle Ages. Cf. Santosuosso, 185.

¹⁸ Oakeshott, 164.

Roman and early Anglo-Saxon history, and his position—not to mention his very existence—is unclear. Gildas, a Welsh churchman writing around AD 500, at least half a century later, refers to him anonymously as a “proud tyrant” or usurper.¹⁹ His name survived in later traditions as Vortigern, and by the eighth century, scholars like the Venerable Bede described him as a king.²⁰ Virtually all that is certain about his life is that Gildas knew of him and blamed him for the calamities visited on the Britons.

According to Bede, it was during the reign of Martian as Emperor of the Western Roman Empire that the people who became known as Anglo-Saxons came to Britain. The Roman legions had abandoned Britain early in the fifth century when several successive leaders made plays for the imperial throne. The final blow to Roman rule came with a rebellion in 408, and Britain was left on its own.²¹ Vortigern, the “tyrant,” was probably one of numerous British warlords who stepped into the leadership vacated by the Romans.

Post-Roman Britain was militarily weak, mostly undefended, and suffered from a crumbling infrastructure and economy. Four decades elapsed between the end of Roman rule and the coming of the Angles and Saxons. After this forty-year period of harassment from barbarian neighbors, Vortigern’s decision to invite a small band of Germanic mercenaries to his kingdom was logical—if foreboding, given the benefit of hindsight. He was merely imitating Roman habit. The Romans had made increasing use of Germanic mercenaries in the final centuries of the Empire, putting them to use in precisely the role

¹⁹ Gildas, *The Works of Gildas*, in *Six Old English Chronicles*, ed. and trans. J.A. Giles (London: George Bell and Sons, 1900), 310.

²⁰ Stenton, 2.

²¹ Adrian Goldsworthy, *How Rome Fell: Death of a Superpower* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale UP, 2009), 340–41, 345.

Vortigern needed filled, as *ad hoc* border defense.²² With three shiploads of armed and experienced warriors now at his beck and call, Vortigern gave them “lands in the eastern part of the island on the condition that they protected the country.” But, Bede wrote, “their real intention was to subdue it.” The Angles won immediate and easy victory against Pictish invaders from the north and sent word to their homes on the continent—weak enemies, good land, enormous opportunity. “[A] larger fleet quickly came over with a great body of warriors,” Bede wrote, “which . . . constituted an invincible army.”²³

According to Bede, who is one of the very few sources for this period, this flood of Angles led to a violent influx of Germans. The invaders came from three major tribes, the Angles, Saxons, and Jutes. Modern scholarship has poked many holes in Bede’s history of these events—it now seems, for instance, that these tribes were far less different from one another and at the same time far less cohesive than Bede thought—but his account is not wholly unlikely.²⁴ Despite the near dearth of information on the earliest years of the Anglo-Saxon domination of Britain, it is apparent that the general—and very rapid—trend for some time was Anglo-Saxon expansion marked by war.²⁵

Though surviving sources such as Gildas and the later Bede make much of the violent arrival of the Angles and Saxons, they recorded very few specific descriptions of that violence. Practically the only battle about which anything almost certain can be said is the Battle of Badon Hill, to which Bede devoted a brief paragraph:

[The Britons’] leader at this time was Ambrosius Aurelianus, a man of good

²² Mark Harrison, *Anglo-Saxon Thegn, AD 449-1066* (Oxford: Osprey, 1993), 3; Finley Hooper, *Roman Realities* (Detroit: Wayne State UP, 1979), 454, 483-4.

²³ Bede, *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, trans. Leo Sherley-Price (New York: Penguin, 1955), 62-3.

²⁴ Goldsworthy, 350-51; Frank Stenton, *Anglo-Saxon England*, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1971), 10-11.

²⁵ Goldsworthy, 349, 351.

character and the sole survivor of Roman race from the catastrophe. . . . Under his leadership the Britons took up arms, challenged their conquerors to battle, and with God's help inflicted a defeat on them. Thenceforward victory swung first to one side and then to the other, until the battle of Badon Hill, when the Britons made a considerable slaughter of the invaders. This took place about forty-four years after their arrival in Britain.²⁶

One cannot fault Bede for not writing a book he did not intend to write. His concern was with the history of the English, how they came to be in Britain and how his once-pagan people were redeemed, and so details of military conquest are scarce in his pages. Badon Hill has never been identified, though candidates are legion, and even the battle's date is uncertain.²⁷ Details of later battles, such as Bedcanford, are just as murky.²⁸

But, ultimately, any victory gained by the Britons was in vain. Badon Hill only temporarily halted the invaders. The Anglo-Saxons had already overrun the majority of southern Britain by the beginning of the sixth century and, after a hiatus of perhaps fifty years, consolidated their conquest. Again, it is impossible to reconstruct this period with exactness, but the earliest sources testify to this two-phase conquest and, as Frank Stenton argued, "when four independent authorities agree in suggesting a single coherent theory, it is unlikely to be very far from the truth."²⁹

What was the Anglo-Saxon military like in this earliest phase? It likely bore close resemblance to the Germanic armies described repeatedly by the Romans. In his *Germania*,

²⁶ Bede, 64.

²⁷ Most scholars settle on a date c. 495, with wide margins for error. Badon Hill's well-known association with Arthurian legend arose much, much later, with some hopeful mythologists identifying Ambrosius Aurelianus as the inspiration for Arthur or, indeed, Arthur himself.

²⁸ Stenton, 27.

²⁹ Ibid, 31. The four sources in question are Gildas, a British polemicist probably contemporary with the Battle of Badon Hill; Procopius, a Roman (Byzantine) chronicler who recorded some details of the crisis in Britain brought to Constantinople; traditions recorded much later by a monk in the monastery at Fulda; and "traditions preserved in the *Chronicle*." One can count Bede's *Ecclesiastical History* a fifth support for the same theory, as Bede recorded no military action between Badon Hill and the mission of Bishop Germanus over three decades later.

Tacitus described in general terms the Germanic warriors of his time. They were warlike, walking about constantly armed, preferring fame on the battlefield to peace, raid and plunder to toil, and commemorating heroic deeds in a strictly oral tradition of song. In battle they organized along lines of authority wielded by chieftains, favored close, tight formations of infantry over cavalry, and the spear above any other weapon.³⁰ Caesar described the Germans fighting in “their usual phalanx formation” with a dense hedge of spears and shields.³¹

Much of these descriptions rings true for early Anglo-Saxon armies. In the chaotic world of post-Roman Britain, the armies of the disorganized invaders were small and their primary purpose was raiding. Archaeological evidence bears out Tacitus’s description of lightly-armored spearmen as the bedrock of Anglo-Saxon war making, with the spear and shield the most common finds in male burials. Other favored weapons were the *seax*, an oversized, single-edged knife from which the word *Saxon* supposedly derives, the sword, and, most rarely, the axe and bow.³²

The sword, though used in battle as a weapon secondary to the omnipresent spear, was an important weapon. The high quality of Germanic swords—and, later, Saxon swords especially—came at a cost of intense and careful labor. A good sword needed iron of a particular variety with a particular concentration of carbon, a particular kind of heat applied in a particular way as it was woven, beaten, cooled, heated, beaten again, and fulfilled before being decorated with runes, inlays of precious metals or stones and presented to a particularly demanding customer. This time-consuming, labor-intensive and

³⁰ Tacitus, *passim*, but esp. 102, 105-7, 112-14, 127.

³¹ Julius Caesar, *The Conquest of Gaul*, trans. S.A. Handford (New York: Penguin, 1982), 56.

³² Harrison, 12-13.

agonizingly meticulous process resulted in swords that were not only powerful weapons, but costly status symbols and family heirlooms.³³

A good sword had a name, pedigree, and reputation. The poorly-made sword not only reflected ill on its maker, but endangered the life of its owner. The legendary Germanic hero Beowulf suffered the failure of two swords. The second, during his fight with a dragon, cost him his life.

*Beowulf was foiled
of a glorious victory. The glittering sword,
infallible before that day,
failed when he unsheathed it, as it never should have.
For the son of Ecgtheow, it was no easy thing
to have to give ground like that and go
unwillingly to inhabit another home
in a place beyond; so every man must yield
the leasehold of his days.³⁴*

But even in this mythical situation reality plays a role. Beowulf is supported in the fight by one of his followers, Wiglaf, who “remembered the bountiful gifts bestowed on him” by his lord and rushed to uphold his duty.³⁵ Despite the failure of his old sword Naegling, Beowulf drew upon Wiglaf’s help and his own skill with a variety of weapons to defeat the dragon.

*Once again the king
gathered his strength and drew a stabbing knife
he carried on his belt, sharpened for battle.
He stuck it deep into the dragon’s flank.
Beowulf dealt it a deadly wound.³⁶*

³³ On the immense difficulty of making swords in the Early Middle Ages, cf. Hilda Ellis Davidson, *The Sword in Anglo-Saxon England: Its Archaeology and Literature* (Woodbridge, UK: Boydell Press, 1962), *passim*, but esp. 15–50. Davidson’s fascinating and detailed account is almost as exhausting to read as the actual process of forging a blade must have been.

³⁴ *Beowulf*, trans. Seamus Heaney (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2000), 175.

³⁵ *Ibid*, 177.

³⁶ *Ibid*, 183.

The “stabbing knife” here is the *seax*, as familiar to all of *Beowulf*’s contemporary listeners as the lordship that bound Wiglaf and Beowulf together.

Over the next three hundred years, the soldiers who bore these arms against the natives of the British Isles probably changed little from the figures striding across the lines of *Beowulf*. St. Augustine of Canterbury reintroduced Christianity, which eventually prevailed over the Germanic paganism brought over from the continent, but the new religion’s morality did not alter the *way* soldiers fought or won battles. During this time, what is today known as England was an assortment of small kingdoms prone to strife, raid and counter-raid, and boasted a rich tradition of petty squabbling. There was no reason, technological or otherwise, for Anglo-Saxon warfare to change, and so English armies evolved little.³⁷ It would take a major shift in every area of life—political, spiritual, and technological—to provoke change.

That change—and the second phase—came in the summer of 793. Scandinavian raiders appeared suddenly at Lindisfarne Abbey, the ancient center of Northumbrian Christianity, and sacked it. “The pagans desecrated the sanctuaries of God,” wrote Alcuin of York, the Anglo-Saxon scholar and favorite of Charlemagne.³⁸ “Behold, the church of St. Cuthbert spattered with the blood of the priests of God, despoiled of all its ornaments; a place more venerable than all in Britain is given as prey to pagan peoples.”³⁹ The pagan Vikings, whose religion was distant kin to that supplanted by Christianity in England, worshiped gods who valued power and courage and therefore felt no compunction about

³⁷ Richard Abels, *Alfred the Great: War, Kingship and Culture in Anglo-Saxon England* (Harlow, Essex: Pearson Longman, 1998), 194.

³⁸ *EHD* I, 778.

³⁹ *EHD* I, 776.

slaughtering and enslaving the unarmed.⁴⁰ To them, monasteries were huge, rich, and—most enticing—undefended targets. Here were sacramental vessels made of precious metals and gems, coin, food, animals, and potential slaves of all ages and sexes.⁴¹

The Vikings rank among the most aggressive opportunists in world history. But their ferocity and greed were matched by their technological prowess, mobility, and mastery of surprise. The Vikings' longship remains a small miracle of shipbuilding—light, fast, and sturdy craft that gave them mastery over the treacherous North Sea, from which they could appear with no warning anywhere along the British coast, land, pillage, and disappear within days or hours.⁴²

The land-bound armies of the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms were cumbersome by comparison. From 793 onward, Viking raids against monasteries and rich estates came so swift and numerous that many went unopposed.⁴³ The English did not have the organization or mobility to stop the raids. By the middle of the ninth century, Scandinavians, primarily Danes, had gained permanent influence over much of northern England and were pushing farther and farther south and west. Less than 90 years after the raid on Lindisfarne, the only English kingdom that had not lost territory to the Danes was the kingdom of Wessex.⁴⁴

⁴⁰ Santosuosso, 143; Susan Wise Bauer, *The History of the Medieval World: From the Conversion of Constantine to the First Crusade* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co, 2010), 459–60; George Holmes, *The Oxford History of Medieval Europe* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1988), 104; Jo Ann H. Moran Cruz and Richard Gerberding, *Medieval Worlds: An Introduction to European History 300-1492* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2004), 197–99. Cf. Jesse Byock's summary of the Norse pantheon in Snorri Sturluson, *The Prose Edda*, trans. Jesse Byock (New York: Penguin Classics, 2005), xvii–xxv; and the role of class and elitism in Norse devotion in Jesse Byock, *Viking Age Iceland* (New York: Penguin, 2001), 294.

⁴¹ Abels, 105.

⁴² On the design, construction, and strengths of the longship cf. Robert Ferguson, *The Vikings: A History*. New York: Viking, 2009), 58–60.

⁴³ Stenton, 243.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 257.

It was from Wessex that the English savior would come. In late spring of 871, Æthelred, the king of Wessex, died and his younger brother came to the throne. King Alfred of Wessex was sickly, suffering from hemorrhoids through his youth and a loathsome intestinal disorder that may have been Crohn's disease all of his adult life.⁴⁵ As a young man he had diverted from a hunting trip to lay prostrate at a shrine, begging God to exchange his hemorrhoids for some other illness.⁴⁶ His piles made it too difficult to ride a horse, something the sickly but warlike prince often endured.⁴⁷

Warlike—and brilliant, Alfred combined courage, aggression, and a keen eye for both strategy and tactics with the discipline and dedication of a scholar. Adding to this his intense piety, Alfred was a sort of Anglo-Saxon Henry V or Charlemagne. But what sets Alfred apart from these two warrior kings was the scholarly attitude with which he approached the problems of his kingship, the most pressing of which was the Danes. Alfred was apparently the first English king to attempt systematically to strengthen his kingdom against the Danes.⁴⁸ His plan was complex—seeking to solve, as it did, a complex problem—and took much of his 28-year reign to implement, but the effort proved worthwhile.

The essential problem was that Alfred had inherited a military system designed for purposes entirely different from fending off Vikings. Anglo-Saxon armies from the first phase of this history fought short campaigns resolved by one or two decisive battles, and their supplies and logistical operations were therefore severely limited. They were also

⁴⁵ Abels, 99-100.

⁴⁶ Asser, *Life of King Alfred* in Simon Keynes and Michael Lapidge, Eds. and trans., *Alfred the Great* (New York: Penguin Classics, 1983), 88-90.

⁴⁷ Abels, 97.

⁴⁸ Stenton, 243.

slow to mobilize, as Alfred learned firsthand in 878, when he fled to the swamps to avoid capture by marauding Danish armies.⁴⁹ In pitched battle the Vikings lost more often than they won,⁵⁰ but they quickly grasped the weaknesses of the Anglo-Saxon system and exploited them to their advantage by leapfrogging between easily defensible sites. The Danes' stockpiles would outlast any Anglo-Saxon attempt to besiege them and, once the English had departed, the raiders could continue their pillaging unopposed. These bases of operation also functioned as retreats when Viking armies encountered superior enemy forces. The English were unprepared to deal with such hit-and-run tactics. They deliberately sought pitched battle and had little or no skill in siege warfare.⁵¹ Even Wessex itself presented a geographical problem, with its long borders, coastline, and many navigable rivers. The Danes could attack from any direction at any time.

Alfred devised a three-fold solution. First, he created a navy. The ships, which he designed personally, were larger than those used by Viking raiders and therefore more powerfully manned.⁵² Alfred had few ships, but a small navy was better than no navy at all, and soon captured Viking ships began to swell its numbers.⁵³ Most important of all, Wessex could now get advance warning of incoming seaborne enemies.

The second and third facets of Alfred's plan were closely interrelated. One was the reorganization of the *fyrd*. Previously, the army had been slow to gather and deploy, and the Vikings could devastate large areas before ever facing an organized enemy.⁵⁴ Alfred solved this problem with the creation of a standing army made up of most of the adult

⁴⁹ Holmes, 102.

⁵⁰ Santosuosso, 140.

⁵¹ Abels, 194-5.

⁵² Stenton, 263-4.

⁵³ For example, the *Chronicle* records the capture of two Danish ships in 881 and sixteen in 884. *ASC E* (79).

⁵⁴ Abels, 195.

male population, serving in two shifts throughout the year.⁵⁵ Using this system, Alfred ensured that “there was always half [his army] at home and half out, except for those men who had to hold the fortresses.”⁵⁶

These fortresses, known as *burhs*, were the last and perhaps most important part of Alfred’s plan. A *burh* was a heavily fortified town⁵⁷ and, in Alfred’s scheme, administrative and commercial hubs designed in a close network throughout Wessex.⁵⁸ Alfred created thirty such towns in his lifetime, either fortifying or refurbishing old towns or building entirely new ones in strategic places. Rivers, of which there were many in Wessex, were a major strategic consideration. Alfred sited many of his *burhs* in locations where a small but armed and fortified unit could thwart riverine invasion. By the end of Alfred’s reign, Vikings “rowing up the Thames would encounter no fewer than five burhs in succession,” each of which held a garrison and lay within easy reach of another *burh* and its troops.⁵⁹

In modern military parlance, this network of mutually-supporting defensive sites is known as a “defense-in-depth,” and such networks are notoriously difficult to root out.⁶⁰ Defense-in-depth aims to rob an attacking enemy of momentum, divide and spread their force so that they cannot concentrate an attack, and grind down the numbers and morale of their troops through time and attrition. Alfred created his system without precedent or

⁵⁵ Specifically, adult male *thegns*, or men holding land from the king in exchange for military service, and *ceorls* (churls), commoners who were obligated to some military service based on their wealth. *Thralls* (slaves) did not serve in combat roles. Harrison, 6-11.

⁵⁶ ASC A, 894 (84).

⁵⁷ The German word *Burg* is a close cognate that still means *fortress* or *castle*.

⁵⁸ Abels, 199.

⁵⁹ Ibid, 201-3.

⁶⁰ The modern masters of defense-in-depth were probably the Imperial Japanese, as the World War II battles of Pelelieu, Iwo Jima, and Okinawa made horribly clear.

reference to any outside model and planned, organized, and brought it into existence—despite nobles who balked at the expense and effort required—almost entirely by the force of his will.⁶¹

Alfred must have been pleased with the results. In 893 the Danes mounted another in their never-ending series of raids, striking into Kent and loading themselves down with plunder. Alfred's new *fyrð* and burghal system worked perfectly. He took his army and maneuvered it between two sections of the raiders' army, cutting them off from one another. Upon Alfred's surprisingly rapid approach, the two halves had followed the Danish custom and holed up in Appledore and Milton. Alfred waited. Planted between them as he was, he could strike down the first to attempt flight. "Then afterwards," the *Chronicle* recorded, "[the Vikings] went through the forest in gangs and mounted groups, on whichever edge was without an army; and almost every day they were sought by other groups both from the army and also from the strongholds, either by day or by night."⁶² Alfred's *fyrð* and *burhs* whittled at the Danes piecemeal until, harried out of Kent, they found themselves forced into battle by the local garrisons of Hampshire and Surrey. Before the end of the battle, Alfred's son Edward arrived with a fresh army and the Vikings routed, abandoning their hard-gotten plunder to the English.⁶³

Alfred's system had worked exactly as intended. The raiding Danes had struck deep only to find themselves tangled in an almost inescapable trap, with enemies everywhere they turned. "Neither Alfred's reformed *fyrð* nor his *burhs* alone would have afforded a sufficient defense against the vikings," one of Alfred's biographers has written.

⁶¹ Abels, 197, 206.

⁶² *ASC A*, 893 (84).

⁶³ *Ibid.*, (84-5); Abels, 294-5.

“Together, however, they robbed the vikings of their major strategic advantages: surprise and mobility.”⁶⁴ Alfred halted the Danes, forced them to fight on his terms, in decisive battle, and then struck them low.

When Alfred died in 899, he left his son Edward a much stronger Wessex than he had found upon his own ascension. He had driven the Danes out, secured his borders and strengthened the kingdom to the point that, in the second half of his reign, he took the fight to the enemy, expanding beyond the traditional bounds of Wessex, capturing London, and inflicting terrible damage on the Danes in the process.⁶⁵ The early Anglo-Saxon world—raids, heptarchy, and military stasis—was gone forever. Even the Danes’ days of independent control over northern and eastern England were short. Alfred, with his numerous and sweeping reforms, “had begun a process that was to result in a unified kingdom of England ruled by an effective, if demanding, central authority.”⁶⁶

The Vikings, for their part, decided to seek easier targets elsewhere. The great raiding army that had once harried Wessex without mercy broke up, and a large contingent made for the northern coast of France, where other Vikings armies were already fighting their way up the Seine.⁶⁷ Despite their best efforts, the Vikings never captured Paris but did cause the French king enough worry to grant them the duchy of Normandy in 911.⁶⁸ Meanwhile, the house of Wessex busied itself with the reconquest of the Danelaw, subjecting settled Danes to English sovereignty and pushing the boundaries of West Saxon England to the Humber, the southern frontier of Northumbria, just over

⁶⁴ Abels, 196.

⁶⁵ Stenton, 258.

⁶⁶ Abels, 217.

⁶⁷ Ferguson, 148.

⁶⁸ Holmes, 102-3.

two decades after Alfred's death.⁶⁹

After Vortigern brought the Anglo-Saxons to Britain, Alfred stands as the man most responsible for the makeup of the eleventh-century English army. He is also the only one of the three figures in this summary who was actually English. The king who brought about the third and final phase of Anglo-Saxon warmaking was a Dane—King Cnut.

It is strange to leap a century past the great Dane-slaying King of Wessex and find a Dane taking the crown he fought to secure. Despite the best efforts of Alfred's progeny, the century between 899 and 1000 did not see Wessex establish total control over the Danelaw, those areas of the north and east of England so heavily populated by Scandinavians that English law did not apply. Even during periods of unity and peace, the Anglo-Saxons remained suspicious of the Danish members of their kingdom.⁷⁰ In the second half of the tenth century, succession crises culminating in the rule of the ineffectual king Æthelred Unræd, combined with the forceful return of raiding Vikings from Ireland and the continent, further weakened Anglo-Saxon England. It was during this period, in 991, that this project's opening case study took place, with Ealdorman Byrhtnoth dying on the shore of the river Blackwater.

The Danes systematically reduced the weakened Anglo-Saxons, extorting immense sums of money in exchange for peaces which they repeatedly broke. In 1013, the Danelaw recognized the Danish invader Swein Forkbeard as its king, explicitly pitting him against Æthelred and the ancestral West Saxon state. Æthelred capitulated to Swein, who died shortly thereafter. Æthelred was king again, but himself died in 1016. His son, the

⁶⁹ John Blair, *The Anglo-Saxon Age: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1984), 47.

⁷⁰ Ferguson, 328.

admirably named Edmund Ironside, fought against the Danelaw's newly elected Danish king, Swein's invading son Cnut. Edmund died within the year, and Cnut ascended the throne of all England in 1016. The house of Wessex had ended in a confusing ruin, and Cnut would reign for seventeen years.

Cnut's great change to the Anglo-Saxon military machine is, of the three, easiest to summarize and perhaps the most underwhelming—the institutionalization of the *huscarls*.

The *huscarls* were professional warriors who combined attributes of the Anglo-Saxon *thegn* and the ancient Germanic hearth-companions common to both England and Scandinavia. The hearth-companions had served since England's hazy Germanic past as a lord's personal bodyguard. It was the hearth-companions who rallied around the fallen Byrhtnoth at Maldon and died to a man, and it was among them that Byrhtnoth and his fellow English lords "loved best to be / and [were] held most at heart."⁷¹ Thegns, on the other hand, held land directly from a lord or king and were therefore bound by oath to him, but unlike the hearth-companions who populated epic poetry, thegns did not live in the royal household and were not professional fighters.⁷²

Like thegns, *huscarls* held land, and like hearth-companions, their essential function was as professional warriors answerable directly to the king. The *Chronicle* also describes them as tax collectors, further reinforcing the idea that they were the king's strong-arm men or enforcers.⁷³ Furthermore, as professionals they were available for

⁷¹ *Battle of Maldon*, in Alexander, 102.

⁷² Harrison, 6-7.

⁷³ C. Warren Hollister, *Anglo-Saxon Military Institutions on the Eve of the Norman Conquest* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1962), 14.

immediate muster, ensuring, like Alfred's army of two halves, that the king had a skilled and mobile force on standby in the event of invasion or rebellion. Introduced only a few years into Cnut's reign, the huscarls would be "the most highly trained and battle-ready force" in England for the next fifty years.⁷⁴

The overall trend of the six centuries preceding the Norman Conquest was of consolidation and specialization. The Angle mercenaries hired by Vortigern brought with them a disorganized system of local lords who thrived on small-scale warfare and raiding. The chaos of invasion gradually congealed into small Anglo-Saxon kingdoms which continued such warfare, albeit on a larger scale. The sudden advent of the Vikings forced radical organizational change upon those few Anglo-Saxons not subsumed by their raids and eventual subjugation of northern England. Alfred's reforms, as noted, introduced and accelerated an already rapid centralizing impulse, culminating first in his own standing army and a century later in the Anglo-Danish huscarls introduced by Cnut. These developments, from small, local levy armies serving petty lords to battle-ready specialists answering the king himself, resulted in a system that would enter the final years of Anglo-Saxon England boldly—and, ultimately, ensure Anglo-Saxon England's destruction.

THE LATE ANGLO-SAXON ARMY AND ITS SOLDIERS

The English army had become skilled in rapid movement by centuries of response to sudden Viking raids. *The Saga of the Jómsvíkings* recounts a failed Viking expedition that could "not make any landing because of the host of country people gathered against

⁷⁴ Ibid, 13.

them.”⁷⁵ It moved by horse and fought almost exclusively on foot. Organizationally, it consisted of the small but elite body of huscarls, the king’s retainers, and the *fyrð*.

Just how the king levied these groups, and in what proportion from which parts of the kingdom, is impossible to say with exactness.⁷⁶ While most historians agree that the ancient Germanic obligation of all able freemen to contribute to defense suffuses the *fyrð*, even this assumption has been attacked as “a strange delusion dreamt up by antiquarians in the late eighteenth or early nineteenth centuries to justify universal military conscription.”⁷⁷ Whatever the case may be, it is obvious from the sources that all classes of Anglo-Saxon men but slaves served in some kind of military capacity at some point,⁷⁸ and it is probable that the lower classes—such as *ceorls*—fought only in local levies while the king’s armies consisted more often of higher-ups.⁷⁹

The military equipment, training, and combat effectiveness of English soldiers depended greatly on their class. The lowly *ceorls* probably favored the spear and seax, with swords being uncommon. Some may have carried farm tools and improvised weapons were common—English soldiers at Hastings even threw stones tied to sticks.⁸⁰ Swords, which have already been discussed, were but one expensive piece of an extremely expensive panoply of which only a handful of wealthy nobles owned a complete set. The Bayeux Tapestry depicts two kinds of Anglo-Saxon soldiers—heavily armed men in mail coats and spear-wielding men in “civilian” clothing. Of the latter, only one carries a sword

⁷⁵ *The Saga of the Jómsvíkings*, 40.

⁷⁶ For representative descriptions of the most widely-held—and debated—views, cf. (in chronological order) Stenton, 290–1; Hollister, *passim* but esp. 25–31, 38–41; Harrison, 8–10; and Abels, 175–9.

⁷⁷ David Sturdy, *Alfred the Great* (London: Constable, 1995), 153.

⁷⁸ Stenton, 290.

⁷⁹ Hollister, 27–8.

⁸⁰ Stenton, 595.

and axe.⁸¹ In combat they were probably amateurs compared to the hard-fighting *huscarls*, but a lifetime of farming or other labor-intensive work had produced men whose toughness made up for some of their inexperience.

Swords, shields, and spears in the army of the eleventh century were mostly unchanged from those discussed above. Helmets seem to have become more common.⁸² The English soldiers depicted in the Bayeux Tapestry wear a pattern common to both sides of the English Channel—a conical skullcap with a long nose guard.⁸³ The old round shields of the early Anglo-Saxon and Viking eras had also mostly given way to the kite-shaped shield used on the continent,⁸⁴ and mail coats—though still monstrously expensive—were ubiquitous among the elite.⁸⁵

The greatest difference between the military gear of Alfred's and Harold Godwinson's times was the broad-axe. Introduced with the institution of the *huscarls*, the English broad-axe was a huge, two-handed weapon meant for one thing—killing.⁸⁶ These axes, unlike their utilitarian forebears and the lighter throwing axes used in the army, were mounted on hafts three to five feet long and had reinforced striking edges of ten—and often twelve—inches.⁸⁷

This axe serves as a useful object lesson in Anglo-Saxon military history. It was, in origin, Danish, not Anglo-Saxon. The English had preferred spear and sword to axe in

⁸¹ Cf. esp. the *huscarls* in plates 61 and 62 and the unarmored men on the hillock in pls. 66 and 67. David M. Wilson, ed., *The Bayeux Tapestry* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1985).

⁸² Harrison, 14.

⁸³ *The Bayeux Tapestry*, *passim*, but esp. pls. 61, 62, 71, and 72.

⁸⁴ Oakeshott, 177.

⁸⁵ Harrison, 16, and cf. pl. L in the same.

⁸⁶ Oakeshott, 154.

⁸⁷ Christopher Gravett, *Hastings 1066: The Fall of Anglo-Saxon England* (Oxford: Osprey, 1992), 31-4; Oakeshott, 154, 177.

antiquity but, like Alfred, adopted new hardware, tactics, and strategy as the need arose. They improvise and adapted as they faced newer and more powerful enemies, first in the invasions of Britain, then on the onslaught of the Vikings. The *huscarls* were not unlike the old hearth-companions, and their weapons had served Cnut well, so the English took the Danish axe and the *huscarl* and remade both. Harold, the last Anglo-Saxon king, would use them often in his few months on the throne.

Familiar Enemies:

The English Against the Vikings, 1066

Men fight hardest when they feel that the foe is at once an old enemy and an eternal stranger.

—G.K. Chesterton¹

OVERVIEW

King Harold Godwinson came to a throne already beset by troubles. Though chosen by the late King Edward as his successor and elected, according to Anglo-Saxon custom, by the *witan*,² there were already two other claimants to the throne, as well as a wild-card—Harold’s brother Tostig.

Tostig had served since 1055 as the earl of Northumbria, but the locals “owed no natural allegiance to a son of Godwin, and they proved intractable subjects.”³ In 1065, Tostig’s subjects rebelled. “All the thegns of Yorkshire and Northumbria gathered together and outlawed their earl,” the *Chronicle* records. The rebellion was apparently well-organized—the rebels assassinated “all the men of [Tostig’s] court they could come at, both English and Danish,” seized hoards of cash and weaponry, and dispatched messengers to Morcar, brother of the earl of Mercia. He was the rebels’ choice to lead

¹ Chesterton, 141.

² David Howarth, *1066: The Year of the Conquest* (New York: Penguin, 1977), 50; for detailed discussions of Harold’s nomination and succession, cf. Howarth, 49–50, 68–75; Frank Barlow, *The Godwins: The Rise and Fall of a Noble Dynasty* (London: Pearson Longman, 2002), 121–28; Frank Barlow, *Edward the Confessor* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1970), 243–252; and especially the exhaustive treatment of the issue in Ian W. Walker, *Harold: The Last Anglo-Saxon King* (Thrupp, UK: Sutton, 1997), 91–102, 114–19, 136–9. On Harold’s post-Conquest reputation and its reflection on his legitimacy, cf. David C. Douglas, *William the Conqueror: The Norman Impact Upon England* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1964), 182–3.

³ Christopher Brooke, *From Alfred to Henry III, 871-1272* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1961), 85.

Northumbria.⁴

Tostig found no support in either the King or his brother, Harold. Harold even arbitrated the dispute for King Edward and the rebels under Morcar, and did so apparently without regard for family ties when the King decided in the rebels' favor. Tostig "and his wife and all those who wanted what he wanted" fled to the continent.⁵ Not long after, Edward died and Harold ascended to the throne. At what point Tostig decided to invade England—and went ahead with preparations to do so—remains unknown.⁶ What seems clear is that, while Harold had to focus on preventing invasion from his first day on the throne, he kept a wary eye out for his brother.⁷

Harold probably expected Tostig to join up with one of the two pretenders to the throne and return to his earldom remora-like, attached to the belly of a more powerful predator. His judgment was correct. Tostig first attempted to team up with William, Duke of Normandy. But despite the fact that William and Tostig's wives were cousins, the duke was not prepared to help, especially if relegated to a supporting role.⁸ In the poetic assessment of David Howarth, the Duke "was busy with projects of his own, elaborate, vast, and very carefully planned. Tostig's irrational plots were no possible help; much less would William have confided his own precise intentions to an unbalanced man who seemed doomed to get himself killed or captured."⁹

So Tostig was on his own for the foreseeable future. He landed on the Isle of

⁴ ASC D, 1065 (191).

⁵ Ibid, (193).

⁶ DeVries, 231.

⁷ Frank Barlow, *The Godwins: The Rise and Fall of a Noble Dynasty* (London: Pearson Longman, 2002), 134.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Howarth, 84-5.

Wight, wrung money and supplies from the locals, and with this funding set to work raiding along the Channel coast.¹⁰ Harold, given what he knew about Tostig's intentions and his ignorance of how negotiation with the Duke of Normandy had turned out, understood Tostig's raids to be the overture to full-scale invasion by William.¹¹ Harold immediately gathered naval and infantry forces "greater . . . than any king in the land had ever gathered before" and sent them to Sandwich.¹² News of Harold's approach was enough deterrent. With a few loyal sailors and many others press-ganged into his fleet, Tostig hurried northward. He entered the Humber estuary to raid and saw his force summarily destroyed by none other than Morcar and his brother Edwin. With only twelve remaining ships, Tostig sought refuge with Malcolm, King of Scotland.¹³

With Tostig apparently out of the way, Harold held out in the south for the coming Norman invasion. Even at its height the Anglo-Saxon army could not stand by forever, and when in early September the army's provisions—as well as their service owed the King—ran out, the army and navy went home.¹⁴ By this time, the irrepressible Tostig had fallen in with Harald Hardrada, the King of Norway and second claimant to the throne of England.

The Norwegian King was "a 'Viking hero' by reputation among his subjects, by fear among his opponents, by deed among historians and saga writers, and especially in his own mind."¹⁵ Harald was also the perfect benefactor for Tostig. He and his people were

¹⁰ Barlow, 135.

¹¹ Brooke, 86.

¹² *ASC C & D*, 1066 (194-7).

¹³ Howarth, 85-6.

¹⁴ Brooke, 86.

¹⁵ DeVries, 237.

warlike and proud,¹⁶ with a deep need “to conquer lands and to raid and plunder,”¹⁷ and, moreover, the seafaring Norwegians had a ready-made fleet—unlike William’s Normans, who spent much of the year preparing merely to sail across the Channel.¹⁸ Finally, and perhaps most importantly, Harald, who can rightly be called the last Viking king, was a king who took his position very seriously. It would be “as a king, about a king’s business” of securing his crown, that he would conduct the coming invasion.¹⁹

Harald gathered his forces and sailed across the North Sea to the Orkneys, where more Scandinavians joined his invasion force, including two sons of the Norwegian jarl of Orkney.²⁰ Now with 300 ships at his disposal—a powerful Viking army—Harald sailed south toward English tides, laying waste the land beginning in Cleveland.²¹ The fleet reached Scarborough only five days after Harold Godwinson’s army, far to the south, dispersed to their homes.

The men of Scarborough were first to resist the Norwegians. The fight could hardly have been fair. Scarborough at the time “was an unimportant place, not much more than a fishing village,”²² apparently unfortified, and the number of soldiers it could field must have been miniscule.²³ Even if help from the surrounding country bolstered the

¹⁶ “No Viking king had to justify an aggressive war; no cover-story had to be devised; no barons had to be bribed or neighbors to be persuaded – and least of all would Harald have cared what the Pope would think about it.” Howarth, 112. Cf. the care with which William courted papal favor prior to his campaign.

¹⁷ DeVries, 237.

¹⁸ Howarth, 113; cf. also the shipbuilding scenes in the Bayeux Tapestry, pls. 35-7.

¹⁹ Robert Ferguson, *The Vikings: A History* (New York: Viking, 2009), 364.

²⁰ Howarth, 124. It is also worth noting that, by this point, Tostig was no longer the primary player in unfolding events, since he “submitted to [Harald] and became his man;” *ASC D*, 1066 (197). Once he teamed up with the powerful Harald Hardrada, he was just along for the ride.

²¹ Snorri Sturluson, *Heimskringla: History of the Kings of Norway*, trans. Lee M. Hollander (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1964), 647.

²² Howarth, 131.

²³ DeVries, 253.

townsmen's numbers, the force was easily outnumbered—Harald's army was at least six times larger than the entire town's population.²⁴

But Scarborough's garrison was determined and probably had advance warning of Harald's approach, thanks to word of mouth from the ravaged lands to the north and a tall headland above the town, where a small chapel stood on the ruins of an ancient Roman "signal station."²⁵ Harald "besieged" the town and built an enormous bonfire on the headland. The cliffs stood directly over the town, and from here his men "took long gaff-poles and hurled brands upon the town. . . . [T]he whole town went up in flames. The Norwegians slew many there and took everything they laid hands on."²⁶

The attack on Scarborough renewed the well-earned Viking reputation for savagery.²⁷ Harald's only apparent intention was psychological warfare²⁸—from this point on, the English in his path "had no choice, if they wanted to save their lives, but to swear allegiance to King Harald." The only other opposition he received until York came at Holderness, where "they met a force that had gathered to oppose them, they gave battle, and King Harald was victorious."²⁹

Harald sailed his fleet into the Humber and up the Ouse, stopping at Riccall. This town lay ten miles downstream of York. He had not been there long when Earls Edwin and Morcar approached from York "with a huge army." "Then the King," Snorri

²⁴ Cf. DeVries, 253, and discussion of Harald's strength, below.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Snorri Sturluson, 647-9.

²⁷ DeVries, 253; cf. Ferguson, 6.

²⁸ DeVries, 253.

²⁹ Snorri Sturluson, 649.

Sturluson writes, “went on land and began to array his army for battle.”³⁰

THE SITUATION—FULFORD GATE, 20 SEPTEMBER 1066

The battle at Fulford seems to have been little commented upon even in its own time, probably because of the coming catastrophes for both sides. Snorri Sturluson, whose description of the battle is the most thorough, passes quickly over it as “a short, elementary, and very bloody fight.”³¹ Though his work is unreliable and poetic rather than historical in purpose, portions of his account are not unlikely.³² It is upon his account and another late description—that of Florence of Worcester—as well as what is known about Anglo-Saxon combat from other literary sources, that a reconstruction of the experience of the Battle of Fulford Gate must rely.

Harald’s army stood on the eastern side of the Ouse, only a few miles downstream of its target, York. Edwin and Morcar faced them, Edwin commanding the English army’s right flank, Morcar its left.³³ Exact troop figures, as in all battles of this time period, are unknown, but an estimation of 5-8,000 for each side seems safe, if not too low.³⁴ That number could have fit quite comfortably in Harald’s ships, so it is likely that numbers on the Norwegian side were even higher.³⁵

It is also possible that the English, whose potential numbers would have been weakened by losses at Scarborough and Holderness, could have been fewer. Edwin and

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Howarth, 133.

³² Christopher Gravett, *Hastings 1066: The Fall of Saxon England* (Oxford: Osprey, 1992), 43; Brown, 203.

³³ Snorri Sturluson, 649.

³⁴ Gravett, 43.

³⁵ Estimating around fifty men per ship in a fleet of 250 ships, Harald’s army would have numbered 11-12,000 men, with some estimates ranging as high as 18,000. DeVries, 241-2.

Morcar had caught Harald at a geographical bottleneck, a Yorkshire Thermopylae that, even if their numbers were significantly fewer, they could have exploited to their advantage. Harald arrayed his army with one end of his lines “on the bank of river, the other . . . further up on land, and extended to a ditch.” Beyond the ditch lay marshland, “deep and broad and full of water.” Harald placed his banner—Landwaster—by the river and marshaled his best troops there, spreading his least reliable troops, probably those of Tostig himself,³⁶ thinly on the right flank, beside the ditch and swamp.³⁷

The battlefield, then, was a flat avenue between the river and impassable wetlands. Earls Edwin and Morcar had chosen this ground well—even if their force was inferior in numbers to the Norwegian king’s, they had flat ground on which to form their shield-wall, and their flanks were well-protected. The same, of course, applied to Harald.

THE CLASH

What little information survives about the brothers Edwin and Morcar suggests that they were bold men. At Fulford, facing the veteran Viking army of the King of Norway, they attacked first. They, as well as the men who had chosen Morcar as earl at risk to their own lives, must have felt something personal at stake. With this foreign army came their previous earl, whom they had considered a foreigner. Though no battle cries are recorded from this battle, one of those used by the English at Hastings less than a month later would have been appropriate—“Ut! Ut!” or “Out! Out!”³⁸

³⁶ DeVries, 256.

³⁷ Snorri Sturluson, 649.

³⁸ Gravett, 64; on the ancient Germanic origin of battle cries, cf. Mark Harrison, *Anglo-Saxon Thegn, AD 449-1066* (Oxford: Osprey, 1993), 31-2; and ch. 4, § “Taunting,” below.

The earls' army formed a shield-wall to match the *skjald-borg* of their enemy and moved against it. Shoulder to shoulder, wearing armor, bearing weapons, carrying a heavy wooden shield at chest height—all while trying to march without tripping each other or breaking formation—the army moved slowly.³⁹ The Saxons had a tradition of boasts and bloodlust reaching into misty antiquity. The backbone of the army—professionals like Edwin, Morcar, and their huscarls—though treating this moment with natural gravity, had trained for battle and most were probably eager to enter the fray.⁴⁰

There remains no record of how those who came behind or supported the professionals felt, those lesser thegns and ceorls armed with farm tools and hand-me-down swords.⁴¹ But it is not safe to assume they were uncommitted or hesitant to fight. Their warlike culture—with traditions centered around heroes like Beowulf, Byrhtnoth, and equally combative churchmen like St. Cuthbert—had prepared them mentally for the slaughter in a way modern historians must struggle to understand.⁴²

The two armies met. Casualties immediately accumulated underfoot.⁴³ “[T]hey fought so bravely at the onset,” wrote Florence of Worcester, “that many of the enemy were overthrown.”⁴⁴ Harald had done himself no favors by bunching his best troops at the river and spreading his worst across the rest of the line. The English pressed hard against

³⁹ Harrison, 30.

⁴⁰ Richard Abels, *Lordship and Military Obligation in Anglo-Saxon England* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 162.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 27.

⁴² Cf. Abels, 17; Frank Stenton's remarks on *Beowulf* and the slow development of religious themes in the Germanic form in *Anglo-Saxon England*, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1971), 193-9; and Dorothy Whitelock's catalog of some common Anglo-Saxon heroes and what Englishmen viewed as their most praiseworthy attributes, “The Anglo-Saxon Achievement,” in *The Norman Conquest: Its Setting and Impact* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1966), 22-4.

⁴³ Cf. *The Battle of Maldon* in Alexander, 105, ll. 111-12.

⁴⁴ Florence of Worcester, 295.

his army and soon found this weakness.⁴⁵ If it was indeed Tostig commanding this wing of Harald's army, the ferocity of the English onslaught becomes even more understandable. It was at the ditch that Morcar's troops pressured Harald's men "to . . . give way, and the English followed them up, thinking that the Norwegians were about to flee."⁴⁶

This initial success was the only success Edwin and Morcar would enjoy.

FLIGHT

At some point, after a long battle bravely fought, and for entirely unknown reasons—though the fickle whim of battle is not the worst suggestion—the English army collapsed. Florence of Worcester records merely that "after a long contest the English were unable to withstand the attacks of the Norwegians."⁴⁷ Snorri Sturluson seems to lay Norwegian victory at the feet of Harald's charisma, since, in his account, the battle went briefly against his army until he raised his banner, ordered the trumpets blown, and led his men forward.⁴⁸ Whatever the reason for the English rout—and even in well-documented battles like Hastings the causes of defeat remain uncertain—both writers agree on what followed.

Writing of combat in classical Greece, Victor Davis Hanson described the choices faced by members of a collapsing phalanx—a military formation not terribly dissimilar from the shield-wall—

it was simply a question of finding a suitable avenue of escape. The choice depended on various factors: the desperation of the situation, the availability of

⁴⁵ Cf. Harrison, 30.

⁴⁶ Snorri Sturluson, 649.

⁴⁷ Florence of Worcester, 295-6.

⁴⁸ Snorri Sturluson, 649.

routes to safety, the degree to which panic and fear had overcome reason, the shame and personal disgrace felt by the more self-possessed.⁴⁹

A number of these factors must have varied from man to man, specifically those psychological criteria such as panic, fear, and desperation. Harold Godwinson and his retainers, like Byrhtnoth and his at Maldon, would stand their ground at Hastings even as his army disintegrated around him.

Weighing, in one's own mind, the price of the shame must have occupied some, as it did Byrhtnoth's men who chose to remain with their fallen lord at Maldon. For those who preferred "retreat . . . to glorious annihilation," they may have had to live the rest of their lives under the shared knowledge of their friends, family, and comrades that they had not held.⁵⁰ *The Battle of Maldon* preserves the names of several who left their lord behind to die—and thanks to this poem, that is all that remains of those men in this world.⁵¹

Florence and Snorri agree that the English army panicked and chose flight. Whether the flight began as a trickle and only slowly turned to a rout or was the spontaneous, morale-shattering result of some chance moment is unknown. Once the retreat began it was impossible to stop. It was at this point that the most objective of Hanson's choices became pertinent—"the availability of routes to safety."

Here also a terrible irony played a role. Edwin and Morcar had confronted Harald

⁴⁹ Victor Davis Hanson, *The Western Way of War: Infantry Battle in Classical Greece*, 2nd ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), 178.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ The poet even takes pains to make sure his readers—or listeners—know to which men specifically he is referring. E.g.: the very last extant line of the poem distinguishes between a Godric who "gave them all heart, / sending spears / . . . driving on the Danish ranks," and "the Godric who galloped away" on his lord's horse. *The Battle of Maldon* in Alexander, 111.

on good ground, with the Ouse on their right and a ditch and swamp on their left. This terrain kept their flanks well-protected, but also, with Harald's army ahead of them, left them only one route of escape—directly to the rear, in the direction of York.

The soldiers of the English army were in an impossible situation. The broken army whirled around them with men dropping weapons, shields, and stripping off armor to make flight easier. Those who could swim and were not encumbered by armor tried their luck in the Ouse. Others took their chances crossing the ditch and slogging into the swamp where, based on Snorri's description of it, they would also have to swim. The rest—those that did not hold out and resist—were caught in the bottleneck they had so carefully prepared for Harald's army. They ran.

Running made this impossible situation even worse. "Besides the odium attached to such a perfectly human response," Hanson writes,

this simple, reckless flight offered perhaps the worst chance of survival. Even in modern battle running away has been often about the most dangerous thing a man could do. . . . Not only did a hoplite endanger his friends by diminishing whatever chance still existed to reform ranks, but more importantly, he offered his back as an easy target for a pursuer. The enemy were likely to target such easy "kills" first, since these men were now unarmored.⁵²

Indeed, English poetry bore this out. *Brunanburh* is a lengthy celebration of slaughter in pursuit, and in *Maldon* the slaughter begins in earnest once Byrhtnoth has fallen and "the lack-willed [have left] the battlefield."⁵³

Harald pressed his army against the fleeing English and butchered them. This was

⁵² Hanson, 181.

⁵³ *The Battle of Maldon* in Alexander, 107. It is worth mentioning here that an age in which the bow and arrow played a greater role in warfare than in classical Greece added an extra dimension of danger to flight. Those still in the field or especially those crossing open stretches of marsh—where the terrain would slow any man down, no matter how panicked—were vulnerable to death from above.

his chance to ruin resistance in the north of England, and were he to favor Tostig with the earldom of Northumbria, a massacre now would mean less chance of rebellion later.

According to Snorri, “nothing held against” Harald’s attack. “Some [of the English] fled up or down along the river, but most leapt into the ditch. There the bodies of the fallen lay so thick that the Norwegians could walk dry-shod over the swamp.”⁵⁴ Florence of Worcester, naturally forgoing Snorri’s revel in the slaughter, wrote only that “more [of the English] were drowned in the river than slain in the field,” implying precisely that Edwin and Morcar’s casualties were relatively light until the end.⁵⁵ The earls’ army met annihilation by trying to flee it.

THE SITUATION—STAMFORD BRIDGE, 25 SEPTEMBER 1066

With the sizable army of earls Edwin and Morcar quite literally drowned, Harald advanced to York. The city surrendered with no further fight and Harald demanded hostages.

Tostig obliged him by choosing men from families he knew to be well-off.⁵⁶ Harald made promises of “complete peace”⁵⁷ provided the Northumbrians provide men and materiel for his forthcoming conquest of the rest of England. But before launching this expedition, Harald needed two things—rest for his army, and more hostages.⁵⁸ The Yorkshire thegns said they would have the hostages ready at Stamford Bridge in five days.⁵⁹ Harald and his

⁵⁴ Snorri Sturluson, 649. Lest Snorri Sturluson be accused of hyperbole and myself of credulity, cf. Matthew Brady’s images of the aftermath of battles like Antietam, esp. the Sunken Road, where a fierce firefight between forces no greater in number than those at Fulford Gate left behind precisely the kind of corpse-glutted trench described by Snorri.

⁵⁵ Florence of Worcester, 296.

⁵⁶ Howarth, 134.

⁵⁷ *ASC C*, 1066 (197).

⁵⁸ Stenton, 589.

⁵⁹ *ASC C*, 1066 (198).

army returned to the fleet downstream, presumably passing through the “place of slaughter” along the way.

Meanwhile, Harold Godwinson had just disbanded his army in the south and returned to London when word of Scarborough’s burning reached him.⁶⁰ Harold rapidly raised an army and marched the 200 miles from London to Yorkshire in four days, spending the night at Tadcaster, which lay only nine miles from York.⁶¹ Harald’s troops had left the fleet behind and were now camped in the fields at Stamford Bridge on the Derwent, apparently disdaining even to post proper guards.⁶² They expected to receive their hostages with no fuss.

The 25th of September 1066 is unusual in medieval history in that scholars know what the weather was like. The sky was clear and the sun bright and hot, so hot that Harald’s men “left their mail coats behind,” carrying only their weapons, helmets, and shields with them.⁶³ On that hot day in September, Harald’s army was lax, luxuriating in the sunshine, and depleted in numbers by the bloody fight against the earls and the necessity of leaving behind a ship guard.⁶⁴

The English army, on the other hand, was ready. On the morning of the 25th, Harold and his army rose and marched from Tadcaster through York, and on to Stamford Bridge.

⁶⁰ Howarth, 129.

⁶¹ Ibid, 135; Stenton 590.

⁶² Stenton, 590.

⁶³ Snorri Sturluson, 651.

⁶⁴ Stenton, 590; Snorri Sturluson, 651. Snorri claims that Harald left one man to guard the ships for every two he took with him to what he believed would be a hostage negotiation.

THE SCRAMBLE

Prior to the vast destruction visited upon it in the years following the Conquest,⁶⁵ Yorkshire and the north of England was good land—the kind coveted by the Danes, coming from the poor soil of coastal Norway and Jutland. York, a heavily-populated trading center in the heart of the Danelaw, was surrounded by ploughland, pasture, and meadow.⁶⁶ With the soil already drained by the year’s crops and baked by the day’s sun, the thousands of hooves and feet of King Harold’s army pounding in the direction of Stamford Bridge raised an enormous cloud of dust. Harald and Tostig’s army saw, but by then it was too late. Below the storm of dust came row on row of glittering chain mail.⁶⁷

It is here that most historians either discount Snorri Sturluson completely or dig in, preparing to defend their notion of English cavalry against all comers.⁶⁸ Snorri, after describing the long, speechifying preliminaries of the battle, claims that waves of massed English horsemen charged against the stout-hearted Norwegians until the death of Harald broke his army’s spirit.⁶⁹ It is clear from every other source available that the English came upon Harald by surprise, and that the battle was lengthy and chaotic. But that does not rule out a small role for English horsemen in the opening stages of the battle. The English reliance on mounted warriors strictly for harrying has been noted. It is also possible that, having caught Harald’s army by surprise, unarmored and apparently scattered on both sides of the river, Harold sent his mounted huscarls immediately into the fray. The result

⁶⁵ Cf. the maps in H.C. Darby, *Domesday England* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1977), 249; and Matthew Bennett, *Campaigns of the Norman Conquest* (Oxford: Osprey, 2001), 55. Says Darby, “The devastation wrought by the campaigns of 1069–70 was no ordinary reprisal. William deliberately left the countryside in a condition in which it could give him no trouble again;” 250.

⁶⁶ Darby, 304–5.

⁶⁷ Snorri Sturluson, 651.

⁶⁸ Cf. Brown, 202–3 with Glover, 179–86, and DeVries, 224–8.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 652–8.

would have been chaos.

It was not often in the Middle Ages that one army was able to ambush another.⁷⁰ Battles were usually arranged ahead of time, preceded by elaborate arrangements and negotiation, or so readily anticipated—as Edwin and Morcar’s resistance must have been by Harald—as to be no surprise at all. Harald, with only two-thirds of his remaining force, and most of them unarmored, had clearly not expected the sudden arrival of the King of England “with all his army.”⁷¹

The English rushed upon the Vikings. The Vikings panicked. The unarmored men could put up only token resistance before fleeing across the Derwent.⁷² Many, like the English only five days before, dove into the river in desperation. Scores drowned, their bodies choking the surface of the river.⁷³

SINGLE COMBAT

At this point there emerges an anonymous figure of whom only one anecdote has survived. The C version of the *Chronicle*, in an interpolation on its final leaf, tells the whole story: “There was one of the Norwegians who withstood the English people so that they could not cross the bridge nor gain victory. Then one Englishman shot with an arrow but it was to no avail, and then another came under the bridge and stabbed him

⁷⁰ The seaborne Vikings being a major exception, though they “were perceived to be vulnerable in open country . . . especially when their whereabouts was known, depriving them of the element of surprise.” This certainly holds true in the case of the last great Viking invasion by the last great Viking king. H.B. Clarke, “The Vikings,” in Maurice Keen, ed., *Medieval Warfare: A History* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1999), 45.

⁷¹ DeVries, 280; *ASC C*, 1066 (197).

⁷² *Ibid*, 198.

⁷³ Howarth, 139; Clarke, 45.

through under the mailcoat.”⁷⁴

Assuming this episode took place—there being no particularly good reason not to—how long could such a standoff have lasted? Not very long, in all likelihood. Despite his Horatius-like courage, this single man wielding an axe in the face of the entire English army could not have lasted more than a few minutes, much less “until three o’clock in the afternoon.”⁷⁵ Despite being one of the only Norwegians who brought armor with him to Stamford Bridge, a continuous barrage of missiles and the onslaught of English infantry at the strategic choke-point of the bridge would soon have driven him to flee—probably to his death—or ended, as the story is handed down, in death at the end of a spear driven into his guts.⁷⁶ But his stand on the bridge did have two results.

First and most importantly in military terms, this man delayed the English and very probably gave some encouragement to his fellow soldiers. The importance of peer pressure and setting an example in English culture—with close analogs in Viking culture—have been noted. And “[t]his Norwegian alone,” writes one modern historian, “withstood the entire Anglo-Saxon army giving Haraldr and Tostig ample time to regroup and order their troops” on the far side of the river.⁷⁷

Second, and more importantly in cultural terms, the axe-man on the bridge made an impression on his enemies. Despite his status as an invader and the damage he did to the English cause in his brief stand at Stamford Bridge, the English could admire his

⁷⁴ ASC C, 1066 (198); the story is repeated and elaborated upon in Henry of Huntingdon, *The History of the English People 1000-1154*, trans. Diana Greenway (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1996), 25.

⁷⁵ Henry of Huntingdon, 25.

⁷⁶ Henry’s more explicit description of his death, that “someone . . . through the openings of the bridge struck him in the private parts with a spear” is especially cringe-worthy. *Ibid.*

⁷⁷ DeVries, 282.

fortitude and courage in the face of the enemy. The same English society that preserved in poetry the names of those fleeing the death of Byrhtnoth in 991 saw fit to record his deed in glowing terms, the late chronicler Henry of Huntingdon describing the warrior as “worthy of eternal fame.”⁷⁸

REGROUPING

Whether the time bought by the Viking Horatius was really “ample” remains to be seen. Given the outcome of the battle, it is easy to dismiss his stand as ineffectual, and yet the battle did occupy the rest of the day. By the time the English had begun moving across Stamford Bridge, Harald’s army had regained some cohesion and was at least slightly prepared to resist. It is probable that the remnant of those caught on the York side of the Derwent rushed to the protection of the as-yet unattacked force on the eastern side, which had seen what was happening and begun to form up.

Here the sources all become laconic. The English army crossed through the bottleneck at the bridge and redeployed on the other side,⁷⁹ a difficult feat even for modern armies, but the *Chronicle* and even later sources give no clues as to how Harold accomplished this.⁸⁰ One must assume good leadership and strong unit cohesion.⁸¹ Once across the river, the English tightened their grips on shields and weapons and moved forward.

⁷⁸ Stenton, 590; Henry of Huntingdon, 25.

⁷⁹ *ASC C*, 1066 (198).

⁸⁰ Howarth, 140.

⁸¹ On Harold Godwinson’s leadership, cf. Ian W. Walker, *Harold: The Last Anglo-Saxon King* (Thrupp, UK: Sutton, 1997), 171; Barlow, 140-1, 171.

THE WOUNDED AND THE DEAD

The purpose of a weapon is to damage an opponent's body to the point that he is incapable of resistance. In the era before gunpowder, a soldier usually achieved this object by inflicting massive trauma in the forms of impaling, laceration, blunt-force, or amputation. It took skill to both handle a weapon and deflect the blows of an opponent, and in the near-pandemonium of battle between opposing shield-walls, each mass shoving against the other, casualties were high.

There is no mention of the wounded on the field during either Fulford Gate or Stamford Bridge—the chroniclers tend to focus on the heaps of dead left behind after the battle. But it is possible, based on an understanding of the shield-wall and the testimony of other sources, to reconstruct some of what the wounded must have gone through during one of these battles.

A wound could come through calculation on the part of the enemy or sheer bad luck. A good soldier on either side looked for opportunities to incapacitate, whether through maiming or killing. The arms and vital, lightly-armored areas were choice targets. Byrhtnoth, already wounded by a spear-thrust, succumbed after a Viking raider severed the tendons at either his shoulder or elbow, “unstringing the Earl’s sword-arm.”⁸² The lone Norwegian on Stamford Bridge, according to a later chronicler, died following a thrust into his groin.⁸³ Even Beowulf, in his mythical fight with the dragon, fell only when his foe

*clamped sharp fangs
into his neck. Beowulf's body*

⁸² *The Battle of Maldon* in Alexander, 106.

⁸³ Henry of Huntingdon, 25.

*ran wet with his life-blood: it came welling out.*⁸⁴

Each of these areas is either vital to one's ability to wield a weapon—in the case of the elderly Beowulf, this ability having already left him—or the site of concentrated blood vessels. Furthermore, the armor worn during this period left all of these areas vulnerable, if not totally exposed, to attack.

As previously noted, the spear seems to have been the favored weapon for the initial clash and that, once its shaft was broken or its head irretrievably fixed in an enemy, the men of the shield-wall resorted to swords and axes. Again, a parallel with the phalanx is not uncalled for: “many of the wounds in the stand-up pushing and brawling were severe cuts from the slashing and parrying of spear and sword, since the opportunity for truly deep-penetrating trauma from a running spear thrust had largely passed.”⁸⁵ Those with minor wounds, one assumes, remained in the line until wounded more severely, forced to withdraw, or killed. Those unfortunates who were maimed and not in danger of bleeding to death faced being caught in the mad press of the shield-wall or falling and being trampled. And depending on the fortunes of battle, remaining on the ground could mean a death blow at the hands of a victorious enemy.⁸⁶

The ground was perhaps the most dangerous place for both the wounded man and the army as a whole.⁸⁷ A formation like the shield-wall, which depends on mass and cohesion for its power, could not constantly be falling apart as men tripped over their

⁸⁴ *Beowulf*, trans. Seamus Heaney (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2000), 181.

⁸⁵ Hanson, *The Western Way of War*, 216.

⁸⁶ Cf. Hanson, *Carnage and Culture*, 139; and Keegan, 113–14.

⁸⁷ Again, both *Brunanburh* and *The Battle of Maldon* describe the wounded and dead cluttering the field both during and after combat, and the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle's formulaic expression “and they made a great slaughter” is typically grim Old English understatement.

crawling fellows.⁸⁸ A man on the ground at Stamford Bridge found himself beneath the feet of 15-20,000 tightly-packed, brawling men—he could easily be trampled to death, probably causing casualties among those who stumbled over him. But remaining upright, especially now that he was preoccupied with his wound, was just as dangerous. Archers and missiles are relatively neglected aspects of Anglo-Saxon combat—mostly because of the utter dearth of source material on the subject—but there exists enough mention of archers to surmise that, at every English battle, as at Maldon, “bows were busy.”⁸⁹ And it is worth noting that both of the kings killed during the campaigns of 1066 fell to arrows in the chinks of their armor—one shot in the eye, the other in the throat.

FLIGHT, HEAT, AND SLAUGHTER

It was at some point during the final struggle of *scild-weall* and *skjald-borg* that Harald Hardrada and his English hanger-on, Tostig Godwinson, were killed. Their deaths are reported in all the sources, but it is Snorri Sturluson alone who relates how Harald died. While apparently berserk, whipping his sword two-handed in the thick of things, he “was struck in the throat by an arrow. That was his death wound.”⁹⁰ Their leader choking out his life in the field, the Norwegian army collapsed. It was Harald’s army that fled this time.

Again, it is unclear precisely what happened next, but Harald’s fleet was apparently still anchored at Riccall, miles away and on the wrong side of the Derwent. Based on the aftermath of Fulford Gate and the extra distances involved in reaching safety for the

⁸⁸ Cf. the massed Frankish infantry at Poitiers in Hanson, *Carnage and Culture*, 139.

⁸⁹ *The Battle of Maldon* in Alexander, 105.

⁹⁰ Snorri Sturluson, 655.

Norwegians, it is easy—if unpleasant—to imagine what happened during the retreat. The English, probably mounting their horses for the pursuit, chased and harried the footbound, unarmored, and probably unarmed Viking survivors.

In this respect, Harald’s routing troops had an advantage over Harold’s advancing ones. The Norwegians and their allies had arrived at the hostage exchange site after a relatively short, relaxed march carrying little more than their arms. The English, in full arms and armor, had marched about ten miles from Tadcaster, “right through York,” and another seven miles before making contact with the lounging invaders.⁹¹ Even had they risen and begun their move before dawn and hastened as they had across the 200 miles from London,⁹² the English could scarcely have reached Stamford Bridge before 10:00 AM.⁹³ While Harold Godwinson’s army had surprise on its side, it was also tired, sweaty, and footsore before any of them ever swung an axe.

The day’s heat would have aggravated what fatigue the soldiers already felt, with thirst playing a corollary role. A heavily burdened man on a hot day needs to rehydrate frequently to avoid the thirst, cramps, confusion, vertigo and unconsciousness attending dehydration.⁹⁴ Furthermore, once the fighting began the long bouts of pushing and blocking with shields, and swinging or thrusting weapons could induce rapid exhaustion. Those men who escaped death or wounds at the hands of the enemy may have faced

⁹¹ ASC C, 1066 (197); Howarth, 134-5.

⁹² Cf. the discussion of Harold’s forced marches in ch. 4, below.

⁹³ Dawn in York on 25 September 1066 came at 5:54 AM. Assuming Harold’s army was already up, armed, ready to move out, and marched at a steady 4 mph, it would have been after 10:00 by the time the two armies came within sight of each other. Cornwall, Chris, Aaron Horiuchi, and Chris Lehman, “NOAA Improved Sunrise/Sunset Calculation,” National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, <http://www.srb.noaa.gov/highlights/sunrise/sunrise.html>

⁹⁴ Cf. Conor Kostic’s discussion of the effects of thirst on Crusaders three decades later; *The Siege of Jerusalem: Crusade and Conquest in 1099* (London: Continuum, 2009), 66-7.

muscular injury. An overworked sword-arm, worsened by heat and dehydration, could have resulted in severe injury because of continued or sudden strain. Some such wounds doubtless resulted from the sheer length of the fighting.⁹⁵

The fighting at the end of the day must have proven especially pitiful. Those members of Harold's army that had not succumbed to wounds, heat exhaustion, muscle fatigue, hernia, or a host of other injuries still had to eliminate pockets of Norwegian troops that had not given way. According to Snorri Sturluson, it was in one of these steadfast groups that Tostig met his end.

But before this last battle began, Harold . . . offered quarter to his brother, Earl Tostig, and to all the Norwegians still alive. But the Norwegians all shouted together and said they would rather fall one upon the other than accept quarter from the English, and raised their war-whoop. Thereupon the battle started again.⁹⁶

Viking fatalism had not disappeared with paganism. Even Snorri's dramatic version of events rings true, harking back to the famous incident following the Battle of Hjörungavágr. Defeated in battle and facing death at the hands of the victors, the Jómsvíkings each met their beheading with wry fatalism, the "courage of despair."⁹⁷ Asked how he felt about death, one said "I am resigned to it . . . the same will happen to me as happened to my father." The saga writer reports another as saying "Death comes to every man," while another took the opportunity to impugn their executioner's honor.⁹⁸ Unlike the unarmed Jómsvíkings after Hjörung Bay, what remained of Harald Hardrada's army

⁹⁵ On general traits of muscular injury caused by strain, contusion, and laceration, cf. Derek R. Armfield, MD, et al., "Sports Related Muscle Injury in the Lower Extremity," *Clinics in Sports Medicine* 25 (2006): 803-4; Cf. the lengthy and detailed discussion of potential muscle injuries and their causes in Arnold Schwarzenegger, *The New Encyclopedia of Modern Bodybuilding* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1998), 774-9.

⁹⁶ Snorri Sturluson, 656.

⁹⁷ The phrase comes from 19th-century French strategist Ardant du Picq, who invoked the idea in his discussion of Cannae. Quoted in Hanson, *Carnage and Culture*, 108.

⁹⁸ *The Saga of the Jómsvíkings*, trans. Lee M. Hollander (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1955), 107-14.

was not only willing to resist, but capable of doing so. Harold's English army had to reduce the armed hold-outs one by one, taking few if any prisoners from among the death-ready Vikings.

The last combat before nightfall took place between exhausted groups of sweaty, sore, blood-soaked, dehydrated men. Despite the distance in time separating the two battles, the final hours of Stamford Bridge probably resembled closely those of Cannae.

This phase of battle is passed over briefly by our sources, and often by modern commentators as well, since it is not a story of tactical brilliance but of prolonged butchery. It must have taken hours for the Carthaginians to massacre their enemy. The pauses between the brief minutes of furious hand-to-hand combat doubtless grew longer as the Punic soldiers had to overcome their exhaustion before renewing the killing. For hours they pressed on, their shields and the chests of their horses stained red with blood, the edges of their swords blunted by so much killing.⁹⁹

Killing, after all, was the aim. Harold's army ran down those enemies who fled and ground down those who resisted. The fighting continued on until nightfall and the vast majority of Harald and Tostig's army lay dead.

By the end of the day the King of Norway's army had been annihilated. After three victories in just over a week, the leaderless army returned north in just 24 ships.¹⁰⁰

CONCLUSION

What one finds inescapable in the battles of Fulford Gate and Stamford Bridge is their length and ferocity. In accounts of both battles, chroniclers mention repeatedly that the combat lasted "long in the day," "was stoutly contested" and "continued steadfastly," and

⁹⁹ Adrian Goldsworthy, *The Fall of Carthage: The Punic Wars 265-146 BC* (London: Cassell, 2000), 212-13.

¹⁰⁰ Stenton, 590.

was “a very hard fight on both sides.”¹⁰¹ One marks also the terrible consequences not only of combat but of defeat specifically. At Scarborough Harald burned civilians alive. At both Fulford Gate and Stamford Bridge hundreds of men drowned, as agonizing a death as is imaginable. And there are the more common results of a military age built around weapons designed to take apart or literally break the body, results so often depicted by Hollywood as to be almost devoid of impact today—the wounded, maimed, crippled, and slaughtered. A pertinent question, a question which must also be asked of Hastings in its turn, is “[w]hat sustained men in combat . . . when the penalty of defeat, or of one’s own lack of skill or nimbleness, was so final and unpleasant?”¹⁰²

¹⁰¹ *ASC C*, 1066 (198); *Florence of Worcester*, 296; *Henry of Huntingdon*, 25; *ASC D*, 1066 (199).

¹⁰² Keegan, 114.

New Enemies:

The English Against the Normans

War is ultimately about doing, not thinking. . . . War is not an intellectual activity but a brutally physical one. War always tends towards attrition, which is a competition in inflicting and bearing bloodshed, and the nearer attrition approaches to the extreme, the less thought counts.

—John Keegan¹

THE NORMANS

In September 1066, the north of England saw armies of similar size, composition, and tactical mindset slug it out in two major bloodlettings. The army of Harold Godwinson was an Anglo-Saxon army through and through, the pinnacle of six centuries of English arms. The army of Tostig and Harald Hardrada was a mostly Viking army, an army that had honed its edge fighting the English for almost three centuries. The Norwegians and English thought of battle in similar terms and fought in similar ways—the *scild-weall* and *skjald-borg* differed only in tongue. These spear-bristling armies of foot soldiers met in decisive battle, and the English waded victorious from the slaughter.

While Harold Godwinson rested his army and celebrated his great victory, away to the south, on the Channel coast, an army alien in all ways from the combatants in York beached its ships and landed. The invaders unloaded the usual trappings of war—swords, mail, baggage, and camp gear—under the eyes of the fleeing locals. England had seen its share of shipborne armies sail in from the horizon, but what set these armored invaders apart was their horses. They brought thousands of horses and took special care in bringing them ashore. And what made this especially strange was that these men had been, only a

¹ John Keegan, *Intelligence in War* (New York: Vintage, 2002), 321.

few generations before, as thoroughly Viking as the dead King of Norway's wasted army.

In 1066 the Duchy of Normandy was still relatively new, as medieval kingdoms go. Its history as an entity began when Scandinavian raiders, at the height of the Viking era, swarmed its shores. As in England, France's Viking problem began with lightning raids, continued through larger, longer, and more concentrated riverine raids, and ended with major settlements in Viking hands, serving as bases of operation for deep strikes inland. In Normandy's case, the river was the Seine (first raided by thirteen ships in 820), the city was Rouen (captured in 841), and the great inland target was Paris. The Vikings continued raiding along the Seine and its tributaries well into the tenth century, repeatedly sacking and besieging Paris, Chartres, and numerous other cities. The fractured, decentralized Carolingian nobility either colluded with or fell victim to the Vikings' depredations. The Frankish monarchy stood powerless to stop the invaders.²

The raiders attacked with the usual Viking qualities of aggression, cunning, and speed. Their highly mobile armies fought on foot and seldom saw defeat. By 911 their leader was Rollo, a Viking of uncertain origin. He had made the Seine his theatre of operations—according to at least one account—since 876, and was so deeply entrenched in the area that the Franks sought terms. The king of the Western Franks at this time was Charles the Simple, and he granted Rollo land around the Seine estuary—a grant upon which Rollo and his son, William Longsword, greatly expanded.³ By 933, the Duchy of Normandy included all the land between Eu, less than 15 miles from the mouth of the Somme, and the island monastery of Mont St. Michel at the base of the Contentin

² Ferguson, 174-5.

³ On the various medieval versions of Rollo's family and nationality, cf. Ferguson, 180-2.

peninsula.

Almost immediately, the Vikings—now called *Normans*, from *Northmen*—changed. Rollo began the slow conversion of his people to Christianity, Danish lost its place as the vernacular, and Norman armies became less and less recognizably Viking. The Normans were newcomers to the developments in cavalry begun in earnest by Charlemagne. Scandinavia, like England, fell outside the sphere of Carolingian military influence and so its armies more closely resembled those of England and ancient Germany than the knight-centered armies brewing on the continent.⁴ Slowly, the Scandinavian conquerors were assimilated from underneath. Within a century of Charles's grant to Rollo, the Norman aristocracy were Christian, spoke little or none of Rollo's tongue, and had armies just like those they had beaten.⁵

These new Norman armies were mixed bags, combining infantry, cavalry, and archers.⁶ The archers wore mail-coats, light armor, or no armor at all, and carried a variety of weapons, including crude crossbows and short bows with a range of about 100 yards.⁷ Little survives to indicate how Norman infantry were organized or precisely what equipment they carried, but they were probably somewhat comparable to English infantry—minus the Anglo-Danish broad-axe and shield-wall formation—with arms and armor varying by class but including swords, spears, shields, helmets, heavily padded coats, and mail. And despite the rise of the knight in Normandy, infantry were still an extremely

⁴ Cf. chapter 2, above.

⁵ Ferguson, 194; Clarke amusingly refers to the Normans as “Frenchified descendants” of the Danes who scourged England. H.B. Clarke, “The Vikings,” in *Medieval Warfare: A History*, Maurice Keen, ed. (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1999), 49.

⁶ It is worth noting that the Normans relied heavily enough on archers that their sources frequently mention them in order of battle, unlike Anglo-Saxon archers, who often have to be inferred from the sources.

⁷ David Nicolle, *The Normans* (Oxford: Osprey, 1987), 12, 17; Charles H. Lemmon, “The Campaign of 1066,” in *The Norman Conquest: Its Setting and Impact* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1966), 93.

important component in a Norman army. One military historian has rightly stressed that “time after time, commanders took the trouble to provide themselves with large numbers of infantry and to employ them in carefully considered formation.”⁸ Continental infantry, outclassed for speed by enemy cavalry, protected their flanks with any convenient feature of the terrain—forest, marsh, water, or uneven ground, anything that would impede a flanking maneuver by the knights.⁹

Though still relying on infantry for numbers and staying power, a Norman army’s knights were a terrible force on the battlefield. The knight of the mid-eleventh century formed a link between the armed horsemen of Charlemagne’s day and the heraldry-festooned gallant brought low in the muck at Agincourt. The Bayeux Tapestry and many contemporary sculptures and illustrations provide a good idea what they looked like, what gear they carried, and how they fought.¹⁰ The horses of the Norman duke’s army in 1066 went unarmored and undecorated into battle.¹¹ The knights rode in saddles that were rudimentary compared to later models,¹² but were sufficient to support a man wearing a mail-coat, helmet, sometimes mail leggings, and carrying a spear, sword, and kite-shaped shield.¹³ Bludgeoning weapons were also common, if less glamorous than the sword—Duke William is depicted in the Bayeux Tapestry carrying a bat-like mace that is probably

⁸ France, 158.

⁹ Nicolle, 16-17.

¹⁰ It is impossible, however, to be dogmatic on any of these issues. Academic storms of frightening fury have raged around seemingly minor issues, such as whether and how often Norman knights at Hastings couched their lances.

¹¹ Andrew Ayton, “Arms, Armour, and Horses,” in *Medieval Warfare: A History*, Maurice Keen, ed. (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1999), 191; Christopher Gravett, *Norman Knight*, in Christopher Gravett and David Nicolle, *The Normans: Warrior Knights and Their Castles* (Oxford: Osprey, 2006), 101.

¹² On Norman saddles, cf. Gravett, 82-3.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 76-82.

less ceremonial than one is at first tempted to believe.¹⁴

The smallest unit of Norman cavalry was the *conroi* of 20–30 men. Groups of these were organized into larger *battailes*, or battles, which together made up a Norman army’s cavalry force. This organization into small units allowed—like the Roman maniple, or “handful”—flexibility and speed of maneuver in combat.¹⁵ These traits were especially important in an army made up of a variety of troops—mix-ups and units stumbling through each other could bring immediate disaster down on an army.

Each of a Norman army’s sections was meant to complement the others. Archers approached an enemy first to “soften up” the opposition, followed by infantry attacks and ultimately cavalry, which was meant to exploit any gaps broken into the enemy by the preceding barrage and assaults. During prolonged combat, the infantry and cavalry supported each other as they charged in turn while also protecting the archers, who held attacking enemies at a distance.¹⁶ This was the pattern followed by Frankish armies confronting the Vikings, and was the pattern used against the English at Hastings two centuries later.¹⁷

PRELUDE

William’s invasion came late in the year. He had spent most of his time since Harold’s ascent to the throne convincing his vassals to supply him with an army, handling its logistics and finances, recruiting allies, building an invasion fleet, and waiting for the

¹⁴ Cf. *The Bayeux Tapestry*, plates 54, 57, 68; Gravett, 82, suggests that William’s mace was “a descendant of the Roman centurion’s vine rod.” This seems like a coincidence born of both items’ most basic function—bludgeoning.

¹⁵ Nicolle, *The Normans*, 11.

¹⁶ Gravett, 101.

¹⁷ France, 158.

weather to change.¹⁸ He also courted the favor of the Papacy, which, now only thirty years from redirecting Christian aggression to the east, looked less than favorably on Christian-on-Christian warfare. William sweetened his offer by declaring an intention to reform the English church, which had—scandalously—allowed Archbishop Stigand to hold two episcopal sees in plurality.¹⁹ The pope gave William his blessing and sent the duke his personal banner, which figures prominently in William’s visual history of the Conquest, the Bayeux Tapestry. Harold, meanwhile, apparently heard nothing of the pope’s judgment against him.²⁰

William’s invasion fleet was ready by August, but remained in port due to bad winds on the Channel. While waiting, he moved his completed fleet from Dives to St. Valery and sheltered it in the mouth of the Somme. Finally, on September 28, after months of waiting, a favorable wind blew and William’s fleet crossed the channel by night, arriving at Pevensey by morning.²¹ The Norman fleet sheltered in the bay while foragers looted the surrounding farms for supplies. “Then,” the poet Wace recounted, “you would have seen the English fleeing, chasing their animals, abandoning their houses, all withdrawing to the cemeteries where they remained in terror.” In the midst of this commotion, Wace continues, a local thegn—a “knight” in Wace’s account—spied on

¹⁸ Huscroft, 118-19.

¹⁹ Howarth, 100-2. William’s grasping for any excuse seems clear when one notes that Stigand’s multiple sees were also invoked as a reason to delegitimize Harold’s kingship—and Stigand’s ordination by an anti-pope, and Stigand’s “worldliness,” and a tiresome litany of other reasons including Harold’s supposed oath and perjury, Edward’s nomination, and so forth. The Bayeux Tapestry has Stigand crowning Harold while holding his anti-pope-tainted pallium, though in fact it was Aeldred, Archbishop of York, who crowned Harold, making the Normans’ arguments moot at best and malicious lies at worst. *The Bayeux Tapestry*, plate 31; on Stigand’s character and his status as a target of Norman invective, cf. Huscroft, 58-9; Florence of Worcester, 294-5.

²⁰ Howarth, 161-2.

²¹ Matthew Bennett, *Campaigns of the Norman Conquest* (Oxford: Osprey, 2001), 37.

William's disembarking army from the safety of a small hill. "Everything," Wace says—the archers, knights, carpenters, building supplies, weapons, armor, and especially the numbers of all of it—"caused him great anguish. He girded on his sword and took his lance, saying he would go to King Harold and give him this news. Then he set out, [going to sleep] late and rising early. He travelled extensively night and day in search of Harold."²²

Wace wrote a century after the events he describes and for a very clear political purpose (the desperate man finally finds Harold "beyond the Humber . . . acting with great arrogance" after having "dined in a town"),²³ but his account is not unlikely. "Local intelligence" and word of mouth, as in the case of Maldon, were often the only intelligence available to medieval commanders. It is difficult to conceive of in such a three-dimensional world, with submarines below the seas and observation planes, spy planes, and satellites overhead, but the medieval soldier's only plane of action was precisely that—a flat plane obstructed by bushes, trees, hills, rivers, mountains, seas and oceans. It was utterly impossible to know what was happening just over the horizon as it was happening. Intelligence traveled only as fast as the fastest rider.²⁴ Whether it was one "knight" traveling pell-mell to York with an eyewitness account or a series of riders spreading word north, knowledge of William's landing began with eyewitnesses and ended at Harold himself only three or four days later.²⁵

Harold's rapid response is the stuff of legend. He retraced his forced march from York to London and called up reinforcements from the *fyrð*. He gave them a week to

²² Wace, *The History of the Norman People: Wace's Roman de Rou*, trans. Glyn S. Burgess (Woodbridge, England: Boydell, 2004), 165.

²³ Ibid. Wace also dismisses the campaign against Harald and Tostig in a few lines and concludes with the statement that "Harold had many other evil deeds performed there."

²⁴ Cf. John Keegan's remarks in *Intelligence in War* (New York: Vintage, 2002), 12-13, 99.

²⁵ Howarth, 157.

arrive but left London before they were completely mustered, apparently expecting the latecomers to catch up. From London he marched the almost 60 miles to a hill north of Hastings in a few days. There, he arranged his forces and waited for William.

The forced march from York to London, from London to Hastings, Harold's aggression and haste, his eagerness to meet William, and, given the benefit of hindsight, the coming disaster—all form part of what one author called “the enigma of Hastings.”²⁶ Why did the remarkable Anglo-Saxon military, developed just for this contingency and so brilliantly successful at Stamford Bridge, fail at Hastings?

Close examination of the battle in light of the history of the *fyrð*, the *huscarl*, and the bonds of Anglo-Saxon lordship raises one strong possibility. But first, it is important to describe what Hastings was *not*. This is a necessary exercise because Hastings has so often been the subject of examination that, for one reason or another, resulted in faulty conclusions.

The Normans chalked their victory up to God and his divine justice. William of Poitiers soliloquized to the dead Harold that “[y]ou have reaped the reward that you deserved” for idolizing power, grasping for it, and trying to defend his stolen blessing by force. “Moreover,” William continues,

you stained yourself with your brother's blood, for fear that his power might diminish yours. Then you have rushed madly into another conflict, so that you might retain the royal dignity by the impious destruction of your fatherland. So you brought down on your own head disaster you yourself had prepared.

By this Norman cleric's standards, Harold was Absalom, Saul, and Cain rolled into one,

²⁶ Edwin Tetlow, *The Enigma of Hastings* (Yardley, Pennsylvania: Westholme, 1972). This book must be frustrating for the general reader, because though Tetlow raises many pertinent questions and often argues vigorously for his perspective, he ends virtually every crucial passage with a limp and anticlimactic “but we will never know for sure.”

and like these three, he received the natural fate that their actions brought upon them. Harold's "end proves by what right [he was] raised" to the throne.²⁷

But what was the instrument of God's justice? An early, popular, and enduring theory is that Harold's army was simply too exhausted to resist the Normans. The contemporary German chronicler Adam of Bremen wrote within a decade of the Conquest that "[s]carcely . . . had eight days passed [since the Battle of Stamford Bridge] and, behold, William . . . sailed over from Gaul to England and waged war against the exhausted victor." The total Norman victory "avenged God, Whom the English had offended."²⁸ Though medieval chroniclers and poets were more interested in the divine justice visited on Harold, this formula of God and exhaustion must have been widely accepted in the Middle Ages and it persists today, though usually with God standing at a polite distance.

Historians since the beginning of the nineteenth century have introduced other factors instead.²⁹ One popular misconception is that the stirrup sealed the Norman victory.³⁰ Another idea—predicated on a whiggish idea of Anglo-Saxon backwardness—is that the diversity of Norman units had to prevail over a simple block of motionless infantry.³¹ Some variants of this theory emphasize the role of cavalry, others of archers. Biographers of William the Conqueror often stress the force of his personality, and Anglo-

²⁷ William of Poitiers, 141.

²⁸ Adam of Bremen, *History of the Archbishops of Hamburg-Bremen*, trans. Francis J. Tschan (New York: Columbia UP, 2002), 159.

²⁹ Indeed, it seems every book on Hastings must have a new theory about the battle's results.

³⁰ This example comes entirely from personal experience. No reputable historian which the author has read has presented—much less argued for—the stirrup as the reason for William's victory, but the author has spoken to many students and friends who believed precisely that.

³¹ This reasoning lies close to the heart of B.H. Liddell Hart's brief discussion of Hastings in *Strategy*. Not surprisingly, Liddell Hart, as an early advocate of the tank and blitzkrieg, admired what he comes close to describing as maneuver warfare and artillery fire. Liddell Hart, 55–6.

Saxon apologists lament the absence of large numbers of the *fyrð*, left behind in Harold's rush to Hastings.³² Others argue that the men of the *fyrð* at Hastings were too inexperienced to win against the veteran Normans, Bretons, and French knights of William's army. Each of these theories is built on a partial truth and any one of them can be combined with the exhaustion thesis, and often are.³³

But none of these theories is an adequate explanation for what happened at Hastings, and each has problems. The battles in the north should belie the idea that the English army was incapable of rapid maneuver, and Hastings itself will disprove the notion of cavalry superiority to heavy infantry. Neither the proposed weakness of Harold's numbers nor the inexperience of his troops can be reconciled with the length the battle lasted—an army too small would have been overwhelmed, an army too green would have fled. The Anglo-Saxon military system was also designed to put large numbers of men rapidly into the field, and it would be odd had it failed to do so.³⁴ Both William and Harold were forceful personalities who could work wonders in their immediate surroundings, but simple geography—the idea of the interrupted plane—argues against a single leader turning a battle stretched across several hundred yards. And though it is impossible to argue that Harold's army was not tired—common sense dictates otherwise—that tiredness must be incidental to a battle that lasted so long. Some element is missing.

A few chroniclers of the early twelfth century factored in what might be called chance. The story of Hastings may have reminded them of King Ahab, a king held in

³² Richard Glover, "English Warfare in 1066," in Stephen Morillo, ed., *The Battle of Hastings: Sources and Interpretations* (Woodbridge, England: Boydell, 1996), 187.

³³ Just two examples of combining multiple partially-correct theories are David C. Douglas, *William the Conqueror*, and Howarth. Cf. esp. Douglas, 196-7, and Howarth, 163-4, 170-1.

³⁴ M.K. Lawson, *The Battle of Hastings, 1066* (Stroud, UK: Tempus, 2002), 161.

disfavor by God and struck low in battle by “a certain man [who] drew his bow at random and struck [Ahab] between the scale armor and the breastplate.”³⁵ The chance nature of Harold’s death—coming at the end of a long and difficult battle—is hard to miss in Henry of Huntingdon, and Florence of Worcester also stresses the duration and intensity of the combat, which only ended with Harold’s death: “At last, after great slaughter on both sides, about twilight the king, alas! fell.”³⁶ Something that is notably missing from both accounts is the notion of exhaustion. Harold’s army loses precisely because Harold is killed. These accounts strike much nearer the truth than most modern theories.

The armies at Hastings were perfectly—nearly too perfectly—matched in strength, composition, and position. Neither leader would end the battle and so Hastings became an all-day battle of attrition.³⁷ Attrition, as Keegan noted in this chapter’s epigraph, “is a competition in inflicting and bearing bloodshed,” and Hastings fits that description exactly.³⁸ Unlike Fulford Gate, a classic infantry battle ending in one side’s rout, and Stamford Bridge, an ambush ending in the annihilation of pockets of resistance, Hastings was a long brawl between equally obstinate opponents that would not end until one side broke. In those instances, more so than in any other situation in war, chance is often the deciding factor.

THE SITUATION—HASTINGS, 14 OCTOBER 1066

During Harold’s march south, William had moved his army from Pevensey to Hastings.

³⁵ I Kings 22:34, ESV.

³⁶ Henry of Huntingdon, 27–8; Florence of Worcester, 296.

³⁷ Stephen Morillo, “Hastings: An Unusual Battle,” in Stephen Morillo, ed., *The Battle of Hastings: Sources and Interpretations* (Woodbridge, England: Boydell, 1996), 226–7.

³⁸ Keegan, *Intelligence in War*, 321.

He fortified his camp there and used it as a base for plundering the immediate countryside. His troops were careful never to venture too far into hostile territory. The *fyrð's* military capabilities were well known and William's otherwise inexplicable stasis after landing speaks to his respect of its power.³⁹ In just over two weeks of waiting for Harold's arrival at Hastings, William's troops inflicted such heavy material punishment on the surrounding country that the land had not recovered two decades later.⁴⁰

Harold, meanwhile, had spent at least five days in London—perhaps even a week—before advancing south. Upon arrival “at the grey apple-tree” near Senlac Hill, Harold pitched camp and probably chose his ground.⁴¹ Version D of the *Chronicle*, “the only contemporary English written” account of Hastings to survive,⁴² makes it clear that Harold expected reinforcements, but he would not have left London without being ready to defend himself. One reason for his haste may have been a desire to reach this ground before William recognized its tactical value. When William formed up his army on the morning of October 14, catching Harold by surprise, Harold's army was already standing on an outstanding piece of defensive earth.

The hill where the battle was fought is long, with another, shorter ridge crossing the end facing Hastings. On a topographical map, the hill resembles an upside-down hammer. Harold formed his army in a line along the hammer's head. This position presented William's army with an uphill charge and protected Harold's flanks with slopes too steep to make attack by either infantry or cavalry possible. Harold's army, like that of

³⁹ Glover, 174-5.

⁴⁰ Nick Austin, “Domesday Analysis: Maps and Graphs,” *Secrets of the Norman Invasion*, <http://www.secretsofthenormaninvasion.com/part11.htm>.

⁴¹ *ASC D*, 1066 (199).

⁴² *ASC* 199n.

Edwin and Morcar, had stoppered the neck of a narrow bottle. The land below was also unfavorable—at least one ditch crossed below the hill and the land was marshy—which created obstacles for William’s army in both attack and retreat. The hill also afforded Harold good visibility. He could see everything William was doing.

Nothing survives to indicate how Harold’s army was organized, but a single line of multiple sections—organized by shire of origin—stretched across the face of the hill is probable. With Harold were his brothers Gyrth and Leofwine, earls of the area corresponding roughly to modern Essex and Kent, and they probably led contingents of household troops and fyrdmen from their earldoms. Most if not all of England’s *huscarls* were present and probably formed the center or forefront of the line.⁴³

William, upon arriving before Harold’s troops on the hill, arranged his army in the Norman pattern described before—ranks of archers, infantry, and cavalry. They would attack in that order. William organized these units into wings by nationality, with his Norman vassals at the center, Breton allies on the left, and French and Flemish allies on the right.⁴⁴

Estimates for the size of both armies vary wildly. It is generally agreed that Harold’s army outnumbered William’s.⁴⁵ After all, Harold had an entire country from which to draw troops, and William had transported all he could convince to come with him across the English Channel, limiting his army to whatever he could pack onto the ships built and borrowed by August.⁴⁶ In all, Harold probably had between 8,000 and

⁴³ Gravett, *Hastings 1066*, 59–64.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 64.

⁴⁵ Howarth, 169–70.

⁴⁶ Douglas, 198.

10,000 infantry. Florence of Worcester reports men leaving his army because of the narrowness of their position, which is vague enough to mean either there were too many men crammed onto the hill to be militarily viable, or that some made an early retreat.⁴⁷ Howarth concludes from this passage that “the army was big enough without them.”⁴⁸

This small, cramped battlefield also worked to Harold’s advantage because it meant that every one of William’s 7,500-8,000 men were caught in a day-long, uphill traffic jam. The largest portion of this number, roughly half, was infantry, with perhaps 2,000 cavalry and about that number of archers.⁴⁹

TAUNTING

Medieval kings may not have had a sophisticated propaganda apparatus at their disposal, but psychological warfare played a role nonetheless. The taunting spoofed in *Monty Python* was a very real and serious part of medieval warfare. War-cries such as those uttered by Byrhtnoth’s hearth-companions and the men gathered on Senlac Hill served two purposes.⁵⁰ First and most obvious was the intimidation of the enemy. The war-cry was an opportunity to display an army’s lack of fear and something of its ferocity. Second, and perhaps more importantly, pre-battle taunts, jeers, and war-cries whipped the members of an army into a high pitch of excitement and aggression. Dave Grossman referred to the individual and collective wills to fight as the “well of fortitude.” In these terms, the purpose of taunting was to make the well overflow.⁵¹

⁴⁷ Florence of Worcester, 296.

⁴⁸ Howarth, 170.

⁴⁹ Gravett, *Hastings 1066*, 27.

⁵⁰ Gravett, *Hastings 1066*, 64.

⁵¹ Grossman’s term is useful but his overall argument questionable. “The fortitude of a unit,” he writes, “is no more than the aggregate of the fortitude of its members.” This introspective view of courage ignores

The war-cries with which the English opened Hastings fit these two purposes exactly. The English shouted three, two of which were religious—the cries of “*Olicrosse!*” or “Holy Cross,” and an invocation of God Almighty, “*Godemite!*”⁵² The third was a single syllable expressing the Anglo-Saxon motivation concisely. “They did not want a foreign king,” Howarth wrote. “They wanted the right to choose their own king in their own way, and to be ruled by the system they themselves had created.”⁵³ Invasion must have carried tremendous weight among a people whose whole society was ordered to cope with the Vikings. According to Guy of Amiens, the English “count[ed] it a great honor to die in arms that their native soil may not pass under another yoke.”⁵⁴ The Normans, former Vikings themselves, therefore faced the rhythmic chant of “*Ut! Ut!*” The English wanted them *Out*.

The Normans responded with a curiosity. A single warrior, “the mummer, surnamed Taillefer,” rode from the ranks and up the hill. In front of the English, he sang, twirled and juggled his sword. At the height of his show, an English soldier broke ranks to attack him and Taillefer cut off his head. Spinning toward his comrades, Taillefer “displayed his trophy and showed that the battle favoured them.” The Normans sent up a cheer and their own war-cry, “*Dex aie!*,” or “God be with us!” Taillefer continued his ride, juggling his sword and striking at the Englishmen who dared confront him, killing three men before being cut down himself.⁵⁵

almost completely what might be called group or mob psychology, which would certainly apply to the 10,000 screaming Anglo-Saxons packed onto Senlac Hill. Lt. Col. Dave Grossman, *On Killing: The Psychological Cost of Learning to Kill in War and Society* (New York: Back Bay, 1995), 83-5.

⁵² Gravett, *Hastings 1066*, 64.

⁵³ Howarth, 171.

⁵⁴ Guy of Amiens, 25.

⁵⁵ *Ibid*, 27.

The only contemporary source to report Taillefer's ride is the *Carmen* of Guy, but the images, particularly Taillefer's egging on of the Normans, are so vivid that the account has the aura of the eyewitness.⁵⁶ At any rate, Taillefer's showy sword-juggling shared its purpose with the Anglo-Saxons' shouts—to shame the enemy and encourage his friends. Taillefer was “a man with a job, not a figure of high romance,” a man performing a very specific morale-boosting task.⁵⁷

That task, whether its instruments were war-cries or insultingly jaunty individual assaults, worked on both sides. By the time Taillefer lay dead, the first Norman casualty, and the archers advanced and nocked their first arrows, both sides were eager for a fight.

ARCHERS AGAINST INFANTRY

William's archers came first. These 1,500-2,000 men advanced from the front ranks of the army and moved uphill on the attack. The English formed the shield-wall, overlapping the front rank of shields and probably raising shields overhead in the rear. The Normans apparently shot their arrows in volleys,⁵⁸ but there is no record of how long they loosed shots at the English before pulling back. Guy claims that these men, armed with short bows and crossbows, “destroyed the shields as if by a hail-storm, shattered them by countless blows.”⁵⁹

This is hyperbole. Far more likely, the enormous field of shields absorbed most of

⁵⁶ Catherine Morton and Hope Muntz, Eds., in *Guy of Amiens*, 83.

⁵⁷ *Ibid*, 81.

⁵⁸ Nicolle, 12.

⁵⁹ *Guy of Amiens*, 27.

the arrows—as it was designed to do.⁶⁰ Harold’s army certainly took casualties—1,500 men cannot fire arrows at 8,000 for long without a few finding chinks in the armor—but the devastating arrow-storm described by Guy was yet to come.

William may have hoped to draw the English out for a fight at the base of the hill. Harold had the advantage in every way, and William knew it, but the English refused to leave the high ground.⁶¹ Instead, they exchanged missiles with the Normans for a short while. The English were not without missile troops, and probably returned fire. They shot arrows, hurled javelins and throwing axes, and even threw “stones tied to sticks.”⁶²

When the “softening up” proved ineffective, William sent his infantry.

INFANTRY AGAINST INFANTRY

As Harold and his army watched the Norman infantry slog through the soft ground below and then start the trudge up the hill, they had every reason to be confident. Despite the nearly identical arms and armor worn by both armies,⁶³ the Normans were at a distinct disadvantage. Not only did the Anglo-Saxons hold the high ground, they held it in a close, disciplined formation designed to be impenetrable—as it had proven against the archers. There were also far, far more of them. Harold’s 8,000 or more men were watching a force half their size attack them.

Again the English formed their shield-wall, readied their spears, and waited. The Normans had to cross the ditch and soggy ground at the foot of the hill, inevitably losing

⁶⁰ Lemmon, 105.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² William of Poitiers, 129.

⁶³ Glover, 176.

some of their cohesion as they did. They may have slowed to regroup on the other side before continuing their slow their progress uphill, burdened by their mail, shields, and weapons. As soon as they came within range, the English greeted them with a blinding hail of missiles.⁶⁴ Faced with enduring these axes, javelins, arrows, and stones in the open, the Normans probably chose to charge the remaining distance and fling themselves against the shield-wall.

The fight was a familiar one to the English, and one they had long ago mastered. Vivid sensory details abound in the sources. Sword-blows fell like thunder on shields and armor, shooting sparks when metal struck metal.⁶⁵ The noise was incredible—shouts, screams, war-cries, and the desperate cries of the wounded in several languages were all drowned out by the clashing of 12,000 weapons.⁶⁶ The two armies, already closely-packed by both formation and the narrowness of the place, shoved against each other into a heaving mass so dense the bodies of the dead and wounded could not fall.⁶⁷ The outmatched Normans pushed frantically against the long rows of spears and shields, and the English bore the onslaught without budging.

The battle was already going badly for the Normans. If William's army broke now, a rout was almost inevitable and the bulk of his fighting force would be slaughtered in flight. Since his infantry could make no dent in the English lines on their own, he committed his cavalry.

⁶⁴ William of Poitiers, 129.

⁶⁵ Henry of Huntingdon, 27.

⁶⁶ William of Poitiers, 129.

⁶⁷ Guy of Amiens, 27; William of Poitiers, 131.

CAVALRY AGAINST INFANTRY

Horses are skittish creatures—those who do not work with them easily forget it. Horses spook easily, tire quickly, require long training just to carry a rider—much less to carry one into battle—and, above all, do not like being injured. Even outside a military context, riding horseback comes with a set of innate dangers and has injured or killed thousands of people. Even a horse's size is a disadvantage, as they present huge targets, especially in an age when a man usually had to stand next to his target to strike it. Writing of Islamic cavalry attacking Carolingian heavy infantry at Poitiers, Victor Davis Hanson vividly described the inherent dangers of cavalry attack:

No horse will charge a wall of serried pikes.⁶⁸ Even the most heavily mailed warrior will be thrown or pulled down from his mount and killed on his back should he try. . . . The infantryman's sharp pike or sword blows to the animal's flanks, rear, legs, and eyes can send the poor horse rearing in milliseconds, throwing his master several feet up into the air, often with a lethal landing for a man in heavy armor. [Wounded horses] can become the enemies, not the servants, of their riders.

Moreover, in a throng of mixed infantry and cavalry, the horse as a means of mobility becomes moot, neither able to advance or retreat and therefore opening itself to any attack its rider is unable to fend off—"infantrymen have the advantage when the killing zone is at last clogged and the fighting face-to-face."⁶⁹ In such situations the horse becomes an easily destructible pair of stilts.

This is precisely the situation to which William committed his cavalry. His order betrays desperation—the main purpose of infantry in this three-class system was to batter the enemy until the verge of breaking, at which point the cavalry would ride in and

⁶⁸ Cf. Glover's remarks on English anti-cavalry tactics; Glover, 185.

⁶⁹ Hanson, *Carnage and Culture*, 136-7.

shatter the weakened army.⁷⁰ Apparently he saw his outclassed and outnumbered infantry crashing ineffectually against the shield-wall and hoped to break through by sheer weight of horse-flesh and numbers. Regardless of his motivation, sending in the cavalry while the infantry were still engaged created a chaotic mess.

The cavalry advanced across the low ground below the hill. They had to cross the marshy ground and drainage ditch carefully—a false step could disable one’s mount for good. Both the poor condition of the ground and crossing the ditch made maintaining the line difficult, and now, another difficulty, the cavalry were moving up the slope. In the pausing and stutter-stepping needed to redress the ranks, some horsemen may have fallen to accidental jabs from the spears of their comrades. Between all these complications and the pitch of the hill itself, William’s knights lost most of their momentum before they ever reached the enemy.⁷¹

When they did, the English wrought havoc. The infantry facing them could not escape because of the line of cavalry now pinning them to the shield-wall, and any horseman that made it through the bustling crush of foot soldiers was a barely-mobile target that was easily struck down.⁷² A knight fallen from his horse, even in the unlikely event that he was uninjured, found himself rolling on bloody, uneven ground while the battle raged around him. The thick press of medieval warfare—as noted at Fulford Gate—was unkind to the fallen. Many were probably trampled to death, and those who were not faced discovery and slaughter by the enemy.⁷³ The infantry, too, were probably beaten and

⁷⁰ Housley, 124.

⁷¹ Jim Bradbury, *The Battle of Hastings* (Thrupp, UK: Sutton, 1998), 142-3.

⁷² Lemmon, 108.

⁷³ William of Poitiers, 133.

knocked down by their own cavalry, taking fatalities and severe injuries among those unfortunate enough to wind up beneath pounding iron-shod hooves.

Harold's army swung and thrust weapons that cut through and shattered all Norman armor brought against them.⁷⁴ The broad-axe terrified the Normans. With its length, its weight, the momentum its long swing threw behind that vast cutting edge, no shield, helmet, or mail could withstand it. Individual Anglo-Saxon soldiers—probably *huscarls*—left the shield-wall or forced enough space around them to swing their axes.⁷⁵ They dealt terrible blows to man and horse alike. Wace describes one English soldier who “held a very fine Norwegian axe, its blade more than a full foot in length,” who pushed to the front of the battle “where the Normans were at their densest” and, putting all his strength into a blow meant for a knight's head, missed and decapitated the man's horse. Everyone who saw gaped.⁷⁶

The ground, even after the gruesome battles in the north, must have been a horror all its own. Medieval people, who slaughtered their own food and often saw, took part in, or fell victim to war, were no strangers to blood. Soldiers must especially have been inured to it. Their weapons were designed to destroy the human body in the most literal way possible, by cutting it to pieces or beating it to failure. Those areas for which they most often aimed killing blows were packed with blood vessels.⁷⁷ For each dead and wounded man, then, several pints of blood must have spilled, soaking clothing, spraying

⁷⁴ William of Poitiers, 129; Lemmon 105–6.

⁷⁵ Howarth, 175.

⁷⁶ Wace, 184. Wace's story may be an exaggeration, but the technical accuracy of his description—even down to the axe's dimensions and its Scandinavian origin—have the ring of a true incident.

⁷⁷ Cf. § “The Wounded and the Dead” in ch. 3, above.

and splattering onto the men nearby, and pooling on the ground.⁷⁸ The cavalry added to the horror. The English seem to have targeted horses and knights indiscriminately,⁷⁹ and in other battles medieval soldiers were known to crawl under halted mounts to disembowel them.⁸⁰ The average horse contains blood roughly equivalent to 10% of its body weight, and strong, athletic horses can have several liters more than the average.⁸¹ A 1,000-pound horse contains over twelve gallons of blood, a great deal of which would have spilled onto the slopes of Senlac Hill. The bodies of the dead and wounded—man and animal alike—collected in a slick, downhill run-off of blood. As the two armies shoved back and forth at each other, boots and hooves churned the ground into mud. For the rest of the battle, all movement—marching, running, charge and retreat—meant not only negotiating the tangle of human bodies common to Anglo-Saxon battlefields, but climbing over or around dead or thrashing, shrieking horses and splashing through a soup of gore.⁸²

Panic set in. Not only had the infantry made no impression on the English position, the cavalry had only worsened the situation. The infantry, as it tried to make way for the charge, could find no exit and became disorganized, streaming downhill in no semblance of order. And the knights could only watch with growing horror as the *huscarls*,

⁷⁸ In one respect, medieval soldiers were lucky in being splattered only with the blood of other soldiers. Keegan notes in *A History of Warfare* that among the items most commonly removed from soldiers in modern wars are fragments of bone and teeth. Keegan, *A History of Warfare*, 90.

⁷⁹ Cf. *The Bayeux Tapestry*, pl. 65, which shows an Anglo-Saxon swinging his axe into the head of a panicked horse.

⁸⁰ Cf. Dino Compagni's account of the Battle of Campaldino, in which cavalry attacking an immovable force of heavy infantry lost many of their horses to crawling men with daggers. The Anglo-Saxon *seax* must have been particularly suited to this work. *Dino Compagni's Chronicle of Florence*, trans. Daniel E. Bornstein (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1986), 12.

⁸¹ Denise Steffanus, "How Much Blood?" *Thoroughbred Times*, <http://www.thoroughbredtimes.com/horse-health/2006/november/14/how-much-blood.aspx>, (last accessed June 25, 2010).

⁸² Here, the author would like only to note that researching and writing this passage has made him as ill as it probably has the reader.

with their axes, took them and their horses apart.⁸³

As skittish and untrustworthy as they were, horses meant everything to a knight. To breed, raise, train, and furnish a horse with saddles and harness, all while undergoing lifelong training in the art of mounted combat oneself—represented a priceless investment of time and money. The horse was also the defining tool and symbol of a vocational class, the mounted professional warrior. Losing a horse was demoralizing not only because of the loss of money involved, but, at least until a replacement could be bought or raised, a horseless knight found himself “reduced . . . to the status of common soldiers.”⁸⁴ These considerations were so all-consuming that something of them must have been felt by soldiers, even in the bloody embrace of combat. One knight described by Wace was so filled with fear at the prospect of losing his favorite horse that he considered hanging back, but abandoned the idea as dishonorable.⁸⁵

But as the fight between the English behind the shield-wall and the halted Norman cavalry continued, the foremost thought would have been to get out. The incipient panic in the confusing, terrifying fight, the fate of the knights and their horses, and the noise, smell, and sight of battle worsened. Then, from somewhere in the throng, word flew that the Duke had fallen.

FLIGHT

Rumor is the perennial bugbear of war. Homer’s swift-winged liar appears from nowhere and spreads with astonishing speed. Even the modern era of near-instant international

⁸³ Howarth, 175.

⁸⁴ Housley, 120-1.

⁸⁵ Wace, 185.

telecommunication has done little to prevent the sweep of rumor through an army.⁸⁶ In combat, with its fear, uncertainty, and myopia, rumor can turn an unperceived victory into a rout. At Hastings, the Norman army's situation was already so terrible that the rumor of William's death could have only one result.⁸⁷

The Bretons on the left wing broke first. The western slope of Senlac Hill was the gentlest and they probably made contact with the English first.⁸⁸ The terrible shock of meeting the shield-wall, made worse by the arrival of the knights in the tumult, resulted in a disorderly retreat. The cavalry rushed pell-mell back through the slower infantry, trampling many. They reached the ditch, which until then had been a tactical nuisance, and the retreat collapsed into chaos. The Bayeux Tapestry depicts horses upended, flipping, rolling, throwing their riders, and one—standing nearly vertical on its head—clearly has a broken neck.⁸⁹

What started on the left with the Bretons soon became general, sped by the rumor of William's death. The Norman, French, and Flemish sections fell back. The English army apparently held its ground—all but its right wing, that facing the Bretons. This wing broke from the shield-wall and gave chase. They cut down the slow and wounded as they ran or turned to defend themselves.

This moment, referred to almost always in secondary sources as “the crisis,” jeopardized William's entire invasion. “Raging,” he raced back and forth on his charger,

⁸⁶ In a humorous example, on the eve of the 2003 invasion of Iraq, a nearly ineradicable rumor that Jennifer Lopez had died passed through the American military. Evan Wright, *Generation Kill: Devil Dogs, Iceman, Captain America, and the New Face of American War* (New York: Berkley Caliber, 2004), 15.

⁸⁷ William of Poitiers, 129.

⁸⁸ Lemmon, 106.

⁸⁹ *The Bayeux Tapestry*, pl. 66.

baring his head so that his men could see his face.⁹⁰ He struck retreating troops with his spear, shouted threats at the Normans and encouragement to his allies.⁹¹ Both early sources put rather wordy speeches into the furious Duke's mouth, but the sentiment of both is the same—"Not one of you will escape death by flight."⁹²

Almost as quickly as the rumor created the rout, William rallied his knights and, guiding by personal example, wheeled them into the flank of the Anglo-Saxons on the Breton flank. Caught off-guard and out of formation, the English took the brunt of William's charge and suffered severe casualties. Among them were Harold's brothers, the earls Gyrth and Leofwine. According to Guy, Gyrth spotted the duke rushing toward him and skewered his horse with a javelin. Leaping to his feet, William struck him down personally, apparently confusing him with Harold.⁹³ The earls' fates, real or imagined, were shared by their men. Those Englishmen who could fled back to the safety of the shield-wall. Some found their retreat blocked by the same ditch that caused disaster among the Bretons and were cut down or trampled.⁹⁴ Others rallied on a small knoll in the low ground of the battlefield. Surrounded, they fought until every one of them had been killed.⁹⁵

⁹⁰ Guy of Amiens, 29. This moment is dramatically recreated in the Bayeux Tapestry, with William in the act of tipping back his helmet while his half-brother, Bishop Odo, points him out to the fleeing knights around them. *The Bayeux Tapestry*, pl. 68.

⁹¹ William of Poitiers, 131; Guy of Amiens, 29.

⁹² William of Poitiers, 131; Guy of Amiens, 29-31. Of the two, portions of William of Poitiers's account have a ring of truth about them. The Duke shouts, in full: "Look at me. I am alive, and with God's help I will conquer. What madness is persuading you to flee? What way is open to escape? You could slaughter like cattle the men who are pursuing and killing you. You are abandoning victory and imperishable fame, and hurrying to disaster and perpetual ignominy. Not one of you will escape death by flight."

⁹³ Guy of Amiens, 31; *The Bayeux Tapestry*, pl. 63 and 64.

⁹⁴ Henry of Huntingdon, 27.

⁹⁵ William of Poitiers, 131; Lemmon, 106.

REST

The few Anglo-Saxons who made it back up the hill were lucky. By the time the Normans had mopped up the soldiers in the ditch and on the hillock, their army was too badly disorganized to mount another immediate attack on the shield-wall. The first phase of the battle ended with Harold's army still firmly in control of the hill and the Normans badly bloodied. A short period of rest followed.

William would have used the interlude to set his army in order, and as quickly as possible. This marked the perfect moment for an all-out attack on the Normans, who would be able to offer only token resistance. Historians and armchair tacticians have blamed Harold ever since for either allowing his right wing to take part in a headlong rush into the enemy's arms or failing to follow the Norman rout with a crushing blow and scattering them to the winds.⁹⁶ But there are two problems here.

The first is that it was—and remains—impossible for a general to have total knowledge and control of his army's actions.⁹⁷ This was especially the case in the Middle Ages, where all orders had to be transmitted by foot or horse. Howarth, in another evocative passage, imagines Harold at his command post on the crest of the hill, and asks

How could he have controlled a line eight hundred yards long and eight men deep? How much of it could he have seen, over the heads of the crowd? How long would an order have taken to reach the ends of it—an aide on foot shoving his way through the ranks to search for some captain who was also on foot? Could even a bugle call in those days . . . have carried such a distance among the other sounds of battle?⁹⁸

Howarth's conclusion was that the fog of war was too great and the transmission of

⁹⁶ Cf. Howarth, 176-77; Lemmon, 107-8; Douglas, 200-1.

⁹⁷ Cf. Keegan's remarks on Wellington at Waterloo, *The Face of Battle*, 133-4.

⁹⁸ Howarth, 177-8.

messages too unreliable to have made a coordinated counterattack possible.

This view goes a long way to explaining Harold's supposed failure, but is not entirely satisfactory—complicating the argument is the memory of the English army's maneuverability at Stamford Bridge. The solution probably lies with the Gyrrh and Leofwine at the foot of the hill. As Harold's highest-ranking subordinates, their deaths caused an immediate power vacuum in a large part of the army at a crucial moment.⁹⁹ While William set about regrouping, Harold probably hurried to regain control of his army through his brothers' own subordinates, and to plug the hole in his right flank, probably by spreading his entire army thinner across the ridge.

There is also one final, simpler matter. Harold knew that the hill was a tactically superior position and that William, in such close proximity to the enemy, had no choice but to attack. Harold had simply to hold out on the hilltop and William would break his army apart on the shield-wall.

The *huscarls* and men of the *fyrð* used this time to catch their breath, eat, rehydrate, and tend to their wounded.¹⁰⁰ Missile troops on both sides picked up their own scattered weapons or retrieved new batches from the train.¹⁰¹ Reinforcements from elsewhere in England, which may have been arriving throughout the day as Harold apparently expected, probably bolstered both English numbers and morale.

The English were stuck with the literal shambles of the last few hours' fighting, which must have grown even more sickening as the day lengthened. In the midst of the carnage some men looted the dead. The Bayeux Tapestry depicts several instances of men

⁹⁹ Morillo, 224.

¹⁰⁰ Lemmon, 107; Gravett, *Hastings 1066*, 72.

¹⁰¹ Lemmon, 107; Howarth, 178.

stripping corpses of their mail coats.¹⁰² Armor, at this stage of the battle, was doubly-valuable loot, being, in the abstract, free merchandise worth years of income and, more practically, immediate protection. Other men mourned the dead. All had seen friends and relatives wounded or killed by this point, and the effect on morale would have been profound. The king himself had lost two brothers, and, even in the midst of preparing his army for rest of the day, this loss must have given him pause.

RESUMPTION

William attacked again. His troops were distraught to find the English army seemingly undiminished, and fighting just as fiercely to hold the hill. William's army, Guy declared *post facto*, could never have "penetrate[d] the dense forest of Englishmen had not guile reinforced their strength."¹⁰³

A great deal of ink has been spilt over the issue of "feigned flights" in the battle. Most Norman sources and some later English ones claim that William ordered his cavalry to attack, fall back from the fray on purpose, and wheel back to slaughter those English soldiers foolish enough to give chase. Lemmon raised questions on the issue never satisfactorily explained away—were such retreats intentional, he wrote, "every man taking part in it had to know when to retreat, how far to retreat and when to turn round and fight back."¹⁰⁴ The academic debates fall outside the parameters of this study, but suffice it to say that the first flight at least was genuine—William of Poitiers said so—and the others

¹⁰² *The Bayeux Tapestry*, pls. 71-3.

¹⁰³ Guy of Amiens, 27.

¹⁰⁴ Lemmon, 109.

taking place throughout the day may or may not have been.¹⁰⁵ The fact remains that, as the sun passed over Hastings, William's cavalry attacked, retreated, and turned on their pursuers several times, inflicting severe losses on the English every time.

Three things changed. The first was the behavior of William's cavalry. The second was that the numbers of the *huscarls*, the bravest and most aggressive English warriors and those most likely to seek out a fight, dwindled.¹⁰⁶ The loss of the best fighters as well as thousands of non-professional fyrdmen meant that Harold had to choose between maintaining the length or depth of his line. A line spread too thin was one easily broken in multiple places, and so his line shrank and he pulled backward up the hill into an even narrower space.¹⁰⁷ The obvious corollary is that William's army weakened as well. Those knights who survived tumbles from slain horses had now to fight on foot with the infantry, who continued to make no impression on the shield-wall and lost scores of men with every fresh attempt.¹⁰⁸ Finally, William began to coordinate the efforts of his forces—the most important aspect of which was continuous missile fire.¹⁰⁹

The battle had become one of simple, ugly attrition.¹¹⁰ Each attack weakened both armies and pushed the battle closer to resolution only because sword-arms and morale weakened. Again the Norman sources invoke the image of men so tightly packed the dead could not fall.¹¹¹ Some men, according to William of Poitiers, though bleeding heavily “leant on their shields and fought on,” while the English “endured punishment as though

¹⁰⁵ William of Poitiers, 129–31.

¹⁰⁶ Gravett, *Hastings 1066*, 73.

¹⁰⁷ Howarth, 180, 182.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 180.

¹⁰⁹ Lemmon, 110; Howarth, 181.

¹¹⁰ Howarth, 182.

¹¹¹ William of Poitiers, 131.

confessing their guilt.”¹¹² Both sides grappled over ground already littered with viscera and corpses, more accumulating as the struggle waxed and waned. Fatigue set in. By now every man on the field was covered with blood in varying degrees of drying, and their clothing was soaked through with sweat. Pauses in the fighting may have grown longer or more frequent—or both. Like boxers too tired to do anything but circle, push, and paw at their opponent, the two armies labored at each other for hours. The fight would be decided by points or a chance knock-out.

DEATH-BEARING CLOUDS

The initial assaults by archers on the shield-wall bore little fruit. Upon the approach of archers and crossbowmen, the Anglo-Saxons lapped their shields and waited out the barrage. At some point William ordered his archers to shoot at a high trajectory, raining arrows down in the mass of men behind the shield-wall.¹¹³ Meanwhile he sent mixed forces of infantry, dismounted knights, and those cavalry who still had horses against the hill.¹¹⁴ Still the English held out and the Normans fell in droves.

The deciding factor was not the Norman flights, feigned or not, or the massive losses on both sides. Howarth believed that “there must have come a moment . . . when Harold might have made a fighting retreat.”¹¹⁵ Here Howarth has let his hindsight unconsciously sway his view, and he assumed that Harold knew he was losing his battle. But nothing about the battle indicates that he was or believed he was near defeat. Harold’s

¹¹² Ibid, 135, 133.

¹¹³ Henry of Huntingdon, 27.

¹¹⁴ Lemmon, 110.

¹¹⁵ Howarth, 182.

conduct of the battle so far made it clear that he would hold out until William's army spent itself. The battle, ultimately, was decided by an anonymous archer who, like the Aramean bowman at Ramoth-Gilead, loosed one unaimed shot.¹¹⁶

The shot came during another all-out push by William's exhausted army on Harold's exhausted shield-wall. The cavalry and infantry were so thinned they could, by this time, work together without apparently interfering with one another. Fresh supplies of arrows kept up the near-constant rain of broadheads on the English army.¹¹⁷ It is easy to view William's push as the last great effort of his army, meant to break the enemy or seal his own destruction, but that is only apparent in hindsight. He had been trying all day to break the Anglo-Saxon line and this attack was just another in a frustrating series of costly rebuffs.

By now Harold had probably drawn his line back to near the crest of the hill, where, at the beginning of the battle, he had set his personal standard and the standard of the House of Wessex. With the battle raging and messengers coming and going, a Norman arrow sailed out of the evening sky and pierced his eye and sank through the eye socket into the base of his brain.¹¹⁸

This horrible wound was not apparently fatal.¹¹⁹ But that fact was lost on the men of his army. An arrow had struck the king in the eye and he collapsed, blood gushing

¹¹⁶ Cf. discussion of King Ahab's death, above.

¹¹⁷ Gravett, *Hastings 1066*, 76.

¹¹⁸ The arrow in the eye appears first in the Bayeux Tapestry and William of Malmesbury is the first literary source to overtly declare that Harold's wound was an arrow to the brain. As for contemporary literary sources, Guy has Harold dramatically dismembered midair by the all-star cast of William and his nobles, and William of Poitiers says nothing whatsoever about the manner of Harold's death. Despite the centuries of academic furor over this topic, it is not an unlikely story. *The Bayeux Tapestry*, pl. 71; William of Malmesbury, 232; Guy of Amiens, 35-7.

¹¹⁹ Wace, 190; Howarth, 183.

from the mutilated socket. His attendants rushed to him, surrounded him, blocked him from view. That sight, to the distracted, fearful soldier in the middle of fighting off the latest Norman assault, could only have one implication. “The flying rumor” of Harold’s death “spread through the fray and forthwith proud hearts were tamed by fear.”¹²⁰

The Anglo-Saxon army began to disintegrate. The death of the king was the death of the army. Fyrdmen fled the shield-wall for the safety of the forest, and *huscarls* fell back to surround and defend their fallen lord. The line became porous, and, at last, Norman cavalry enveloped its flanks and broke through several weak points.¹²¹ Once on the height of the ridge the knights were on perfect ground for cavalry, and they exploited this ground fully.¹²² One can only imagine the adrenaline rush that came when, after a day of defeat and physical danger and misery, they broke free of the gore-carpeted hillside and things began to go right.

In the last light of the day, one small group of knights, who had sworn together to ride down Harold and capture his banners, set their eyes on those standards and spurred their horses. They broke through the screen of *huscarls* defending the king, struck the wounded Harold down, knocked down his standards, and carried them off.¹²³ If any of the English army had doubts about the king’s fate, the sight of his banners falling and then waving from the hands of enemy knights revealed to them the truth. With its leader dead and his own brothers, who may have taken over, dead as well,¹²⁴ the king’s army collapsed.

The wounded fell behind and “lay helplessly in their own blood, [while] others

¹²⁰ Guy of Amiens, 37.

¹²¹ Gravett, *Hastings 1066*, 78; Howarth, 182.

¹²² Lawson, 214.

¹²³ Henry of Huntingdon, 28; Lemmon, 111.

¹²⁴ Bradbury, 148.

who struggled up were too weak to escape.” Adrenaline and fear sped the rest from the field by foot or horseback.¹²⁵ Many dashed to the forests, where they could hide until darkness.¹²⁶

Even as darkness fell the battle did not end. There remained until the end the *huscarls*, the inheritors of the traditions of the Vikings—a tradition ending with such slaughter at Stamford Bridge—and the Anglo-Saxons, whose hearth-companions had laid their lives down for their lords at places like Maldon and, now, for the last time, at Hastings. Their lord dead, the *huscarls* chose to remain behind and fight until they avenged him or died themselves.¹²⁷ Darkness contributed its own form of chaos to the combat, with knights tumbling into unseen ditches and *huscarls* appearing, striking blows, and departing into the night.¹²⁸ One group making a rearguard last-stand frightened off Count Eustace of Boulogne and inflicted losses among the noble knights before they, too, were slaughtered or routed to the forest.¹²⁹

After an entire day of combat, the shattered, weakened, exhausted Norman army held the field.

CONCLUSION

Like the battles in the north, Hastings was long and hard-fought. It was the most horrific of all the battles in 1066 and the most catastrophic for the losers, if not in the short-term then certainly in the long-term. Again Keegan’s question is pertinent: how could men face

¹²⁵ William of Poitiers, 137.

¹²⁶ Guy of Amiens, 37.

¹²⁷ J.F.C. Fuller, “The Battle of Hastings, 1066,” in Stephen Morillo, ed., *The Battle of Hastings: Sources and Interpretations* (Woodbridge, England: Boydell, 1996), 170.

¹²⁸ Lemmon, 111-13; Fuller, 170.

¹²⁹ William of Poitiers, 139.

such horrible battles while knowing the results of failure—and sometimes even victory? What “sustained” them?¹³⁰ In the case of the Anglo-Saxons, what sustained their soldiers, what helped them endure defeat and win astonishing victories, was also what led to their destruction at Hastings—loyalty to one’s lord.

¹³⁰ Cf. “Conclusion” in chapter 3 and Keegan, *The Face of Battle*, 114.

Conclusion:

A Society Founded on Comradeship

War is brutish, inglorious, and a terrible waste. Combat leaves an indelible mark on those who are forced to endure it. The only redeeming factors were my comrades' incredible bravery and their devotion to each other. . . . That esprit de corps sustained us.

—E.B. Sledge¹

This study began with John Keegan's central question about *The Face of Battle*—"How would *I* behave in a battle," that is, *what was it like* to fight with the Anglo-Saxons?²

Central to answering this question was the study of Anglo-Saxon battles, not simply from the god's-eye view of deskbound tacticians, but, as much as possible, from the ground, shoulder to shoulder with the men of the shield-wall. A survey of Anglo-Saxon England's place in the march of western military history provided an idea of how—drily, clinically—its military evolved and for what reasons and ends. The battles of 1066, among the most fully documented of medieval battles and certainly of the Anglo-Saxon era, provided three brutal case studies, each of which illustrated themes experienced in small scale in Chapter One, with Byrhtnoth and his men at Maldon. The idea of *what it was like* to emerge from these studies is of agonizing, brutal, bloody, and nightmarish conflict.

The horror of Anglo-Saxon combat raises again the deeper question from Keegan, of "[w]hat sustained men in combat . . . when the penalty of defeat, or of one's own lack of skill or nimbleness, was so final and unpleasant?"³ When Keegan asked this question of the soldiers at Agincourt, he settled on some answers applicable only to Agincourt and

¹ E.B. Sledge, *With the Old Breed: At Peleliu and Okinawa* (New York: Ballantine, 1981), 315.

² Keegan, *The Face of Battle*, 16.

³ Keegan, *The Face of Battle*, 114.

others common to all battles.⁴

Among his general answers are alcohol and religion, both of which were in ready supply in Anglo-Saxon England. Chroniclers do not mention the role alcohol played in preparing for combat, but wine, mead, and other intoxicating beverages figure heavily in Anglo-Saxon literature. In but one example from *Beowulf*, King Hrothgar describes how

*[t]ime and again, when the goblets passed
and seasoned fighters got flushed with beer
they would pledge to protect Heorot
and wait for Grendel with whetted swords.*⁵

A riddle from the Exeter Book could rightly claim of mead that “[m]en are fond of me. I am found everywhere.”⁶ But this is not to say that men entered combat drunk. *Beowulf* speaks in damning tones of Unferth, who boasted his intention to kill a monster while drunk and promptly forgot about it, and mead, in the same riddle, mocks those drunks whom it can “knock . . . about in broad daylight.”⁷ Alcohol’s role, like taunting and war-cries, was to bolster, an idea evoked in the twentieth century with the slang “Dutch courage.”

Religion, like alcohol, was so ubiquitous as to merit hardly any mention in its military role.⁸ Harold Godwinson’s army even captured an unnamed “Norse” bishop following the slaughter at Stamford Bridge and adopted “Holy Cross!” as one of its battle cries.⁹ Clerics traveled with the armies, administering the mass before battle and the last rites after. Alfred the Great, when fighting the Vikings with his brother at Ashdown,

⁴ Keegan, 114.

⁵ *Beowulf*, 33.

⁶ Alexander, 73.

⁷ *Beowulf*, 101-3; Alexander, 73.

⁸ France, 233.

⁹ ASC D, 1066 (199); Gravett, *Hastings 1066*, 64.

carried the battle with his forces alone while his brother attended a lengthy pre-battle Mass. Here were two kinds of piety—Æthelred, the legalist and idealist, who “would not leave that place alive before the priest had finished,” and Alfred, the realist, whose undoubted piety still gave way to military necessity.¹⁰ And the role of God in aiding armies against injustice has already been discussed.¹¹

Keegan’s question of how men made it through such battles leads from the general to the particulars, those things specific to a time, place, and culture. Because, as Hanson has noted, “War reflects culture.”¹² And if the experience of battle in Anglo-Saxon England reflects one particular, a first specific that must be declared “Anglo-Saxon,” it is the bond of lordship. Lordship was not merely a means of structuring society, or of enforcing law, of making a living, or even of ensuring a military levy. This bond was not just a legal tie but a deeply personal one as well, as illustrated in the emotional language describing the bond in poems such as *Beowulf*, *The Battle of Maldon*, and *The Wanderer*, a long elegy from the point of view of a lordless, and therefore friendless, man. But most importantly, for the Anglo-Saxons and this study, the loyalty between lord and subordinate from king to *ceorl* created and dictated battlefield conditions as much as the average thegn’s shield and sword.

To return to the beginning of this study, the seminal description of this bond in action is *The Battle of Maldon*. Here again is Dunnere, a “humble churl” and therefore

¹⁰ Asser, 79; Cf. Hanson’s discussion of the western tendency to allow rational necessities to supersede religious considerations—even among the pious—in *Carnage and Culture*, 170-232, esp. 205-8. By way of comparison, the Spartans of the 4th century BC would never violate a religious festival for military reasons, resulting in their absences from Marathon and, very nearly, from Thermopylae.

¹¹ Cf. chapter four, “Overview,” above.

¹² Victor Davis Hanson, “The American Way of War—Past, Present, and Future: Why does America fight the way it does?” in *The Father of Us All: War and History, Ancient and Modern* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2010), 137.

even further removed from Byrhtnoth than the hearth-companions:

*“A man cannot linger when his lord lies
unavenged among Vikings, cannot value breath.”*¹³

Anglo-Saxon combat was, above all, *personal*. This holds true not just in the vertical loyalty of lord and *thegn*, but horizontally, with hatred extending to the enemy and a powerful love among the men fighting together. The secondary effect of bonds of lordship was the bond forged between men serving the same lord. These twin loyalties were inextricably tied together. In *The Wanderer*, the lordless man mourns the course his life has taken when, after his lord’s death,

*dreary I sought hall of a gold-giver,
where far or near I might find
him who in mead-hall might take heed of me,
furnish comfort to a man friendless,
win me with cheer.*

*He knows who makes trial
how harsh and bitter is care for companion
to him who hath few friends to shield him.
Track ever taketh him, never the torqued gold,
not earthly glory, but cold heart’s cave.
He minds him of hall-men, of treasure-giving,
how in his youth his gold-friend
gave him to feast. Fallen all this joy.*¹⁴

The man without a lord was a man utterly unattached in a dangerous world, with no protector—a lord—and no friends—those others bound to the same lord and therefore to him. In *Maldon*, the *thegns* and *ceorls*, when declaiming their loyalty to their fallen lord (vertical), do so to each other (horizontal). Byrhtnoth was “our lord,” “the Earl who led us,” and his followers, “brothers,” one after another “called to [their] companions /

¹³ *The Battle of Maldon*, in Alexander, 109.

¹⁴ *The Wanderer*, in Alexander, 48-9.

friends and fellow-thanes to come forth to battle.”¹⁵

Vengeance in battle was not an isolated event, but a trait of Anglo-Saxon culture and its stress of avenging wrongs in the name of loyalty, whether to family or lord. Personal loyalty was tied up in honor and shame. Alfred’s army at Ashdown was “aroused by the grief and shame of” defeat at Viking hands a few days earlier.¹⁶ Moreover, an individual’s actions could earn shame for the whole group. “My deeds,” shouted Leofsunu at Maldon,

*shall give no warrant for words of blame
to steadfast men on Stour, now [Byrhtnoth] is stretched lifeless,
—that I left the battlefield a lordless man,
turned for home. The irons shall take me,
point or edge.*¹⁷

Following Edwin’s defeat at Hatfield, the captured Northumbrian *thegn* Imma confided his name and position to his captor, who says, “You deserve to die, because all my brothers and kinsmen were killed in that battle.”¹⁸

What is the significance of all this? In battle, loyalty to one’s lord meant victory or death. This idea appears repeatedly in Anglo-Saxon military history, and could have repercussions far beyond the death of an ealdorman. At Hatfield in 633, King Edwin of Northumbria died in battle against the Welsh and Mercians, and “his entire army was destroyed or scattered.” Among the dead were two of his sons, one of whom died early in the battle while the other was forced to surrender, only to be betrayed and murdered. With most of the army’s *thegns* dead or captive and no clear successor to Edwin as King,

¹⁵ *The Battle of Maldon*, in Alexander, *passim*.

¹⁶ Asser, 79.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, 109.

¹⁸ Bede, 242.

Northumbria split in two and fell under the rapacious rule of the Welsh king.¹⁹ “Edwin’s defeat,” wrote Frank Stenton, “meant not only the collapse of the confederation which he had founded but the extinction of his branch of the royal house,” not to mention the end of the Christian Church Edwin had helped to build in his kingdom.²⁰

As in Northumbria following Edwin’s death at Hatfield, so too in all of England following Harold’s death at Hastings.²¹ The battle itself may have been tactically altered because of the deaths of Gyrrh and Leofwine, two important men bound to numerous subordinate *thegns*,²² but the battle and ultimately the war were lost when Harold fell. His *huscarls* and many of the *thegns* and *ceorls* remaining in the army felt bound to stand by his body and avenge him, as had their forebears at Maldon and their Scandinavian cousins at Stamford Bridge. Their near total annihilation at Hastings avenging their king resulted in a lack of ready professional warriors, and William marched unimpeded to London to take his crown. Because of the destruction of its king and those bound to him, “a whole generation of English people suffered death, desolation, robbery and bewilderment.”²³

A final passage from Keegan is appropriate. In advocating a bottom-up study of combat, of the experience of combat, Keegan wrote that if such an approach

leads [the historian] to question—as I have found it does me—the traditional approach to writing about combat corps à corps, to decide that, after he has read the survivors’ letters and diaries, the generals’ memoirs, the staff officers’ dispatches, there is yet another element which he must add to anything he writes—an element compounded of affection for the soldiers he knows, a perception of the hostilities as well as the loyalties which animate a society founded on comradeship, some appreciation of the limits of leadership and obedience, a

¹⁹ Bede, 140-5.

²⁰ Stenton, 81, 116.

²¹ In an odd coincidence, Hatfield and Hastings may have been fought on the same day, October 14. The Chronicle gives Hatfield’s date as the 14th, while Bede states that it took place two days earlier.

²² Morillo, 227.

²³ Howarth, 185.

glimpse of the far shores of courage, a recognition of the principle of self-preservation ever present in even the best soldier's nature, incredulity that flesh and blood can stand the fears with which battle will confront it and which his own deeply felt timidity will highlight—if, in short, he can learn to make up his mind about the facts of battle in the light of what all, and not merely some, of the participants have felt about their predicament, then he will have taken the first and most important step in understanding battle “as it actually was.”²⁴

The most striking thing about Anglo-Saxon bonds of personal loyalty was the dual role of both, not only sustaining men through terrible combat but being, in and of itself, the idea that made that combat so terrible. Byrhtnoth's retainers and Harold's *huscarls* refused to leave the battlefield, resulting in terrible battles of attrition. What “sustained” men in combat is what made combat “like” the way it was. What bound Anglo-Saxons to each other not only kept men going but cut them to pieces.

²⁴ Keegan, *The Face of Battle*, 33-4.

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