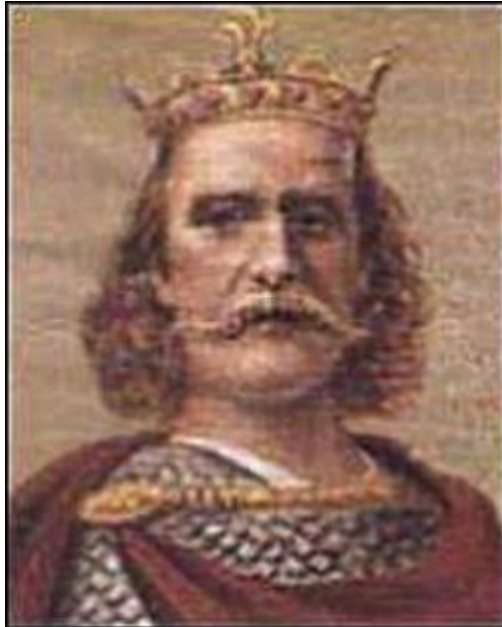


Harold Godwinson – the Last of the Anglo-Saxons

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Shire of Wurmwald, Middle Kingdom, Known World



In 1066, on the fields of Hastings, King Harold Godwinson died by an arrow through the eye. He was King of the English for 9 months and 11 days [1].

If you follow some Norman sources, this is just about the best thing you would hear about Harold. You would hear a bit more about how he was captured and an oathbreaker. Some of the Norman sources would refer to him as Earl Harold, not really granting him the title of King. History is, as we know, written by the victors. Norman historians were very keen to make sure William's claim as Edward's heir was well known.

There is much more to Harold than a short reign and a quick death. He had the makings of a good king and with a little luck, he might have survived Hastings.

Unfortunately, Harold's story is too wound up with that of Edward the Confessor, William the Conqueror's, and that of Harold's own family. It would be potentially possible to tell the tale of Edward or William with just a footnote about Harold. But for Harold, we must give a great deal of background of why things happened and that means talking about who these other people are in some detail.

Perhaps the most significant event in Harold's life and one of the most significant events in British History is the Battle of Hastings in 1066. To begin our story, we then need to build up to why this battle happened and why Norway and Normandy were interested in England.

Asides the First

Anglo-Saxon names

Anglo-Saxon names are generally made of a protoneme and deutrone. There are about 20 of each, maybe more. Some combinations would not make legal names but real life exceptions to the rules exist as well. So, there should be about 780 unique names. Unfortunately, in this time period, the notable people chose to use only about 6 names (sarcasm). There are multiple Ediths, Harolds, Sweins, Edgars, and Edwards. And as I have often said to my shiremates, spelling is optional in Old English so there are multiple ways you could spell these names.

Truth v Fact

Throughout this essay, I say “might”, “could have”, etc. I am reminded of Raiders of the Lost Ark where Indy is teaching a class. “Archaeology is the search for fact... not truth. If it's truth you're looking for, Dr. Tyree's philosophy class is right down the hall.” The medieval historians were definitely down the hall. We are dealing with two facets of the medieval mindset here. The first is divine will. Things happened because God wanted them to happen that way. So, William wins the Battle of Hastings and conquered England because that was God's will and Harold and the English must have done something to lose God's blessing. That leads to the second medieval mindset. Medieval historians are reporting the truth, not the facts. If God wanted William to win England, then what clues were left that he wanted that? William won, Harold must have done something awful (oathbreaking), Halley's Comet was a sign of God's favor leaving Harold, etc.

In reading medieval history, an awful lot of events happen on Easter. Now, this is probably near the beginning of Spring and it could be the closest time stamp but it is also very significant. If you say something happened at Easter, you are adding the symbolism of Christianity to the event. This mindset makes it difficult to know the facts.

Aethelred the Unred

Our story starts then in 968. Edgar the Peaceable, king in my time, took a new wife, Elfrida and in 968 she gives birth to a son, Aethelred. In 978, King Edward the Martyr, Edgar's son by his first wife, is killed, possibly by Elfrida and Aethelred is made King at the age of 10. Olaf I of Norway had vowed to recover the territories of Northern England and had made several raids on the coast. This leads to the *Battle of Maldon* [2] in 991 which the English lose and Aethelred makes the decision to start buying off the Norse. This is the start of Aethelred's famous cognomen Unred. Advised by the Archbishop of Canterbury, Sigeric the Serious, to buy off the Norse rather than continue the struggle, Aethelred pays Olaf 10,000

Roman pounds of silver (3300 kg) [3]. But the Norse behaved as they had always done, taking the money but continuing the attacks anyway. To pay for this "tribute", Aethelred institutes the *danegeld*, a tax used to pay off the Vikings. During the era, more than 65,000 kg of silver were paid to various Viking raiders. Or to put in other perspectives, ~60 million pennies were paid to the Vikings, ~87 tons of silver, or ~10 million pounds in today's money.

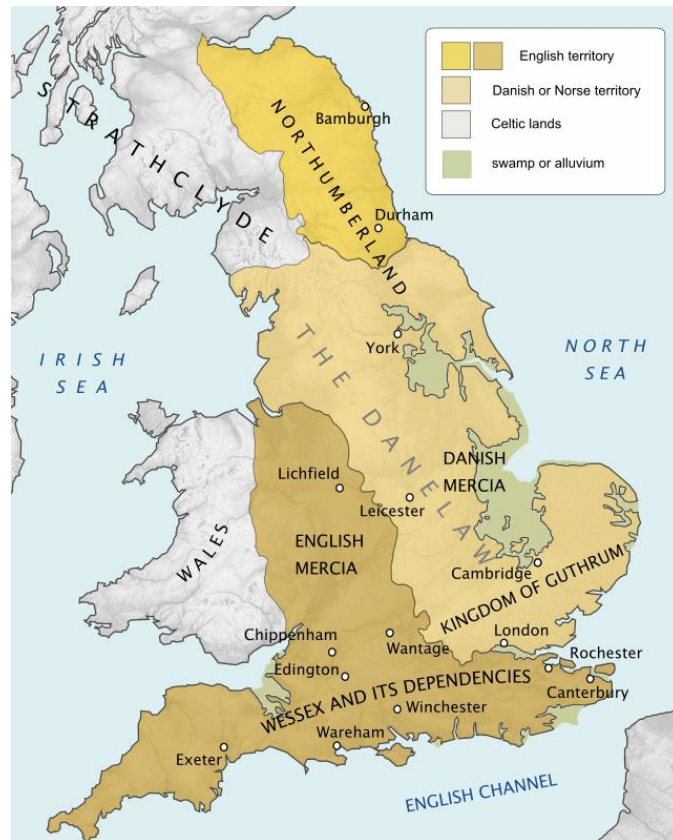
In 1002, Aethelred marries Emma of Normandy, who will be William the Conqueror's great aunt. Some of the Viking raids were getting safe port in Normandy, so the marriage was intended to cut off these ports from the raiders. According to the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle [4], Aethelred was told that "[the Danes] would faithlessly take his life, and then all his councilors, and possess his kingdom afterwards." In response, he "ordered slain all the Danish men who were in England." This event is referred to as the St Brice's Day Massacre on November 13, 1002. This massacre was led by close friend of Aethelred, Eadric Streona – the Grasper. Eadric personally murders Ealderman Aelfhelm of York and blinds Aelfhelm's sons. As a reward, Aethelred removes several Mercian nobles to promote Eadric to Ealderman of Mercia. Swein Forkbeard of Denmark would later claim that his sister was also killed in these raids. Aelfhelm's daughter (not sure where she was during the massacre) ends up marrying Cnut.

In further attempts to stop Viking raiding, Aethelred amasses a large fleet of 100 ships. Harold's grandfather leads some of the ships and is falsely accused by Eadric's brother. We don't know on what charge. But the Anglo-Saxon chronicle [5] tells us that Eadric's brother lost 80 ships in a storm trying to capture Harold's grandfather. Harold's grandfather is exiled but Godwin, Harold's father, is not exiled and actually starts to rise to prominence at court [6]. Swein Forkbeard of Denmark and Olaf team up to retaliate for the massacre and end up conquering the Danelaw sections of England and driving Aethelred into exile in Normandy with Emma and her sons. Aethelred's sons by his first marriage stayed in England (the future king Edmund Ironside is one of these).

Swein, Cnut, and Edmund

Swein is then king of England for a short time between 1013 and his death in 1014. Technically, Cnut was named as heir by Swein but he was not yet ready with his army. Aethelred is recalled by the Witan to England. In 1015, Edmund Ironside rebels against Aethelred, his father. Here we get more Eadric Steorna. Sigferth and Morcar were prominent *thegns* in the Five Boroughs region. They had supported Cnut but when Aethelred returns to power, they came to Oxford, perhaps seeking for a royal pardon. Eadric murders them. Aethelred then ordered that Sigferth's widow, Ealdgyth be brought to Malmesbury Abbey, either to be killed or forced into the nunnery. Edmund married her in defiance of his father and starts building power in the region [7]. Cnut by this time is ready to claim his lands and invades England. Aethelred then dies in 1016. The Witan in London proclaims Edmund King. In perhaps what must have seemed like stranger than fiction, Edmund retains control in the Danelaw and Cnut gains control of Wessex. Each has control of the other's powerbase. They fight an inconclusive battle and agree to divide England between them, with Edmund going to Wessex and Cnut going to the

Danelaw. More important to our story though is that Godwin is a strong supporter of Edmund's. In November 1016, Edmund dies and Cnut is made King of England.



Cnut is an interesting man and worthy of his own class. He clearly respected Edmund. According to Lawson [8], "Cnut visited his tomb on the anniversary of his death and laid a cloak decorated with peacocks on it to assist in his salvation, peacocks symbolising resurrection." He marries Emma of Normandy in 1017. For a time during Cnut's reign, Emma is the Queen of England, Denmark, and Norway.

In general, Cnut was not a brutal man (for his time) but he was not a fool either. He kills many of Aethelred and Edmund's supporters, especially those who changed allegiances. He deemed that they were untrustworthy. It is said, Cnut "loved those whom he had heard to have fought previously for Edmund faithfully without deceit, and . . . hated those whom he knew to have been deceitful, and to have hesitated between the two sides [9]. Eadric finally gets his comeuppance by Cnut. Godwin, who was one of Edmund's supporters, survives and becomes a trusted advisor to Cnut. In time, Godwin would be made Earl of Wessex, becoming increasingly powerful and wealthy.

Edward the Confessor

Cnut rules for 19 years until his death. His sons divided his empire with Harthacnut taking Denmark. Norway also broke away in rebellion and its new King Magnus was threatening Denmark. Cnut's older son, Harold Harefoot ruled England, either as a co-ruler or a regent until Harthacnut could claim it himself. Or at least, that might have been the plan. Harold Harefoot ruled half of England, north of the Thames, but Godwin and Emma were in support of Harthacnut and ruled on his behalf in the south.

In 1037, Alfred Aethling and Edward the future Confessor received a letter from their mother Emma to return to England [10]. This letter might have been a forgery to trick them or it may have been a genuine attempt by Emma to unseat Harold Harefoot. Alfred is captured by Godwin but Edward escaped after a skirmish in Southampton. Alfred was blinded and then died of his wounds. It is not clear whether Godwin or Harold did this but Edward would blame Godwin regardless of the truth. Emma goes into exile for a time and obviously, Godwin switched sides to back Harold.

Harold dies in 1040 of an unknown disease. Harthacnut was preparing to invade anyway but when Harold became ill, Harthacnut waited with his mother and the Witan offered him the crown at Harold's death. Upon arriving in England, he had his half-brother's body dug up, beheaded, and thrown into a bog [11]. According to the *Enconium Emmae Regina* [12], this was in retribution for Harold's killing of Alfred. Godwin was made to pay a *wergild* which took the form of an elaborately decorated ship.

In 1042, Harthacnut "died as he stood at his drink, and he suddenly fell to the earth with an awful convulsion; and those who were close by took hold of him, and he spoke no word afterwards" [13] at a wedding. At some point in 1041, Edward the Confessor is also co-ruling in England with Harthacnut. There is some thought that Harthacnut may have actually had tuberculosis and it was pretty well known that he was dying. If so, he had no heirs and Emma may have arranged for her last surviving son to be made heir. Another common theory is poisoning. So, when Harthacnut dies, the Witan makes Edward king. In 1045, Edward marries Edith, Godwin's daughter, to help secure support among the English nobles. Around this time, Edward also makes Harold Godwinson Earl of East Anglia. The Godwinsons will dominate much of the important earldoms in England from then on.

Harold and his family

Throughout the remaining time in Edward's reign, Godwin's personal influence begins to wane as Harold's begins to rise. One dividing issue between Godwin and Harold involves Harold's brother, Swein. Swein was Earl of Merca. In 1046, Swein was raiding in Wales. He kidnaps the Abbess of Leominster with the intention of marrying her. The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle [14] says, "he ordered the Abbess of Leominster to be brought to him and kept her as long as it suited him." Under the threat of excommunication, Swein releases her and Edward exiles him to Denmark. Edward also divides Mercia in half and gives half to Harold and half to Beorn, Harold's cousin.

In 1049, Swein attempts to reclaim his lands. Again, the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle [15] tells us that Swein “ruined himself with the Danes.” Godwin was very supportive of his son’s return but Harold refuses to give up the lands in Mercia. Edward gives Swein four days to leave England. He captures his cousin Beorn, has him killed, and buries him in an unmarked grave in Dartmouth. Swein was then declared *nothing*, a man without any redeeming qualities and returns to exile. In spite of this, Godwin somehow manages to persuade Edward to reinstate Swein in 1050.

In 1051, a band of visiting Normans got into an altercation with some citizens in Dover. The Normans were led by the Count of Boulogne [16], the King’s brother-in-law through his sister. Edward ordered Godwin to punish the people of Dover for the altercation and Godwin refused. Godwin marches with an army to a meeting with Edward and Edward hastily calls up some of his own troops. Outnumbered, Godwin gives two hostages to Edward, his youngest son Wulfnoth and Hakon, one of Swein’s sons. Harold was part of the revolt but interestingly, he was not required to give a hostage. Godwin and all of his sons are exiled. Godwin and Swein go to Denmark and Harold goes to Dublin. Edward starts planning to divorce Edith.

Another question about Edward is that of celibacy. Edward had no sons by Edith and no sons by anyone else. Norman sources claim that Edward took a vow of celibacy and that is the grounds for his saintly life. It has also been suggested that Edward did not want a scion of the Godwin’s as his heir [17]. I agree with Barlow [18] that it is extremely unlikely that Edward refused sexual relations though. Continuing the family line is one of the most important duties of a King as it ensures stability. It is more likely that one or both Edward and Edith were infertile. Unfortunately, we will never know which. Edward therefore may have been trying to divorce Edith both to remove her family from power and due to her childlessness.

The Return of the Godwinsons

Godwin and his sons would not go quietly. Godwin and Harold raised armies of mercenaries and raided England. Swein went on a pilgrimage to Jerusalem as penitence for his transgressions. Godwin still had a great deal of support in England and the men Edward sent against him were inexperienced. Godwin easily overpowered them and forced Edward to reinstate the Godwin family including Edith to Queen. This is in 1052. One result is that Archbishop Robert flees England, possibly with the Godwin hostages, for Normandy. If Edward made a promise to William, this is the most likely time (see **Promises Made?**). Swein dies in 1053, travelling back from Jerusalem. Around Easter in 1053, Godwin dies at a banquet. Harold is Godwin’s heir due to Swein’s death and Edward appoints Harold Earl of Wessex after Godwin’s death.

Harold the Man



According to Orderic Vitalis [19], Harold "was very tall and handsome, remarkable for his physical strength, his courage and eloquence, his ready jests and acts of valour."

Harold's relationship with Edward was much different than his father's. Edward may have resented Godwin but he seemed to genuinely like Harold. Harold was somewhat independent of his family. He supported Edward over the issue of Swein's return. Edward did not seem to hold his brother's death against Harold, just against his father [20]. Harold would also later support exiling his other brother Tostig for the good of the kingdom.

It is possible that Edward saw Harold's potential. Harold was highly educated for the time. He could speak English, French, Flemish, Norse, and Latin. He was very charismatic and used that charisma to achieve diplomatic solutions. He was a good warrior and commander. And he was pious, helping to found a college and taking a pilgrimage to Rome. As Edward aged, he turned much of the day to day operations over to Harold, possibly so Edward could supervise the construction of Westminster Abbey. Harold would be hailed as *subregulos* and *Dei Gratia Dux*.

The *Vita Edwardi* says [21], "In strength of his body and mind, Harold stood forth among the people like a second Judas Maccabeus: a true friend of his race and country, he wielded his father's powers even more actively, and walked in his ways, that is, in patience and mercy, and with kindness to men of good will. But disturbers of the peace, thieves, and robbers, this champion of the law threatened with the terrible face of a lion."

Without getting into the details as to why, Earl Aelfgar was exiled and he fled to Wales. He allied with Gruffydd of Wales and attempted to invade England [22]. While there was certainly armed conflict, Harold was able to negotiate an end to hostilities. Earl Aelfgar was restored and Gruffydd acknowledged Edward as his overlord [23]. Aelfgar and Gruffydd would attempt the same thing two more times. Once more, Harold resolves the first through diplomacy but the last was resolved with might. Harold uses unusual tactics for the English, captures the Gruffydd's palace and treasure, and drives Gruffydd into the mountains. The defeat is so humiliating that one of Gruffydd's own earls kill him and sends his head to Harold as a token of peace [24].

Between Welsh attacks, Harold may have tried to bring Edward the Exile home to be heir to King Edward. Edward the Exile had been living in Hungary for many years after the reign of Cnut. There may

have been an embassy earlier to have him returned but conflict between the Holy Roman Empire and Hungary meant that no accommodation could be made. However, in Nov 1056, Harold may have witnessed a document in Flanders. This document bears the name "A Haroldi Ducis." Count Baldwin of Flanders was Harold's brother-in-law. Baldwin then goes to Cologne on other business and to a town on the Danube. The next we know of Harold in particular is his pilgrimage to Rome. We do not know for sure that Harold went to Hungary. We know he was out of the country, we are pretty sure he was in Flanders, and we know he was in Rome. We know Edward the Exile returns to England in 1057 [25].

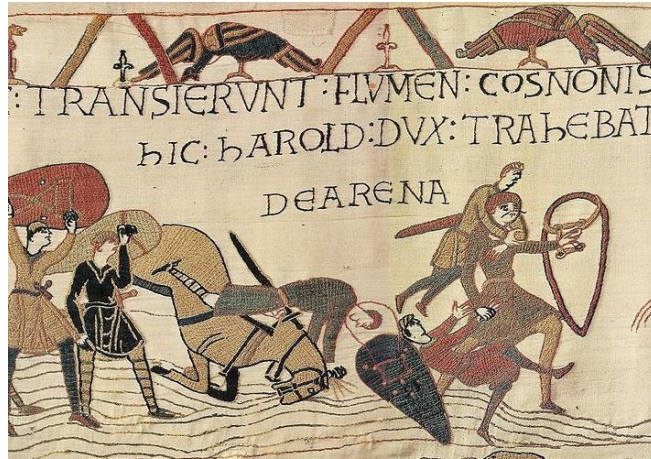
On his pilgrimage to Rome, Harold again shows some of his charm and skill. It is said that he passed through ambushes "with watchful mockery as was his way [26]." The purpose of the pilgrimage was to get relics for the new updated abbey he was building at Waltham. Again as a sign of piety, this was the same church that Harold claimed a miracle had happened. He claimed his prayers at the Holy Cross in Waltham had cured him on paralysis when he was a child [27].

Regardless of what the Normans later thought of Harold, they did feel he was a capable warrior and valorous.

He was a renowned hunter and went everywhere with his hounds and hawks. He had numerous books on falconry which would be quite rare and valuable. Twice in the Bayeux Tapestry, Harold is shown with his hounds and hawks.



William invites Harold to accompany him on a military expedition. On this expedition, Harold saved the lives of two Norman warriors from quicksand [28].

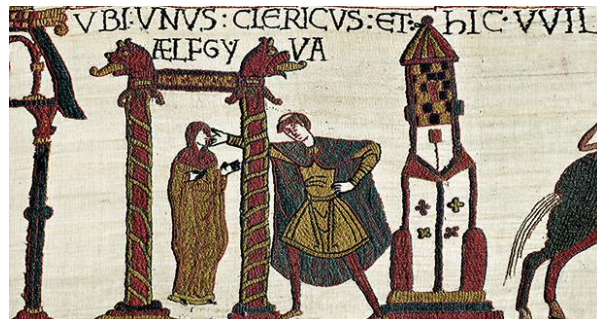


And while it may have been a trap, William does knight Harold for his gallantry in the campaign against Conan of Brittany.

Harold is married, in the Danish style, to Edith Swannesha (Edith the Fair) and had at least six children with her. This was a marriage under Germanic law but not necessarily involving the Church. Edith Swannesha, often translated as swan-neck. She was considered extremely beautiful and very wealthy. It was Edith's connections and lands in East Anglia that enabled Harold to begin to build a base of support. Harold later married another Edith to give him connections in Northumbria. According to Orderic Vitalis, he may have been betrothed to Adeliza, William's daughter. But if so, they never married [29].

Between his lands in East Anglia, Northumbria, and Wessex, he was the second wealthiest man in England before becoming King. He then inherited the King's lands upon his coronation. The Domesday Book however only records his lands as an Earl.

Harold also makes a trip to Normandy, possibly on behalf of Edward. We are not sure why Edward would have asked him to do that. William claims that Edward sent Harold to affirm William's claim. Harold may have had reason to go to Normandy himself. He might have gone to arrange a marriage. Orderic claims Harold may have been betrothed to Adeliza. The trip may have been to discuss that. The tapestry has this strange image.



The woman's name is Aelfgyva and that is all we know. It is unclear if the cleric is approving of her or assaulting her. This might be in reference to some scandal that was common knowledge. This might be whatever Harold and William were talking about. Or it might be Harold trying to offer his sister as a wife to one of William's nobles [30].

One reason Harold might have gone to Normandy that makes a lot of sense is that Harold went to arrange for the release of his brother and cousin. The fact that Harold does leave with his cousin suggests that he was partially successful.

Time for more asides

Promises Made?

The whole basis for the Conquest is that William believed that Edward had made him his heir. But did Edward do that? There is a large question of when he could have done that. While Edward was in exile in Normandy, it doesn't seem likely he would be making anyone an heir since he didn't have anything to leave him. William visits Edward around 1051 in Canterbury [31] so it could have happened here. But again it seems unlikely as Edward might still have children. The best guess is that Archbishop Robert made the promise (whether real or not) to William and presented William with Godwin's hostages. The problem is that William doesn't mention this promise until 1064. That is 13 years. Why not make it more well known if that really happened? Edward also may have promised to make Sweyn II of Denmark his heir [32]. A few years before his death, Edward tried to have Edward the Exile recalled in order to make him an heir. Lastly, on his death bed, on 5 January 1066, Edward supposedly commended his widow and the kingdom to Harold's "protection" [33]. Edward had no children of his own but he would have been well aware of how English Kings are crowned. So, why would he promise his kingdom to anyone, knowing it was an empty promise? Likewise, William had enough contact with England that he should have known how the Witan worked.

How to become King of the English

Edward the Confessor's promises, if made, fly in the face of how one becomes King of the English. The normal way is for the Witan to meet at the King's death and elect a new King. They look for two things: royal blood and ability. The current King's wishes would have some impact and naturally, the current King often educated his "heirs" on how to be king. But, it was just as likely that the Witan would elect a brother to the King over young heirs. Each of Alfred the Great's brothers was King before him. They also might elect cousins or children from other branches over others. Elfwear was the half-brother of Aethelstan and might have been king before him. The main issue being it was the Witan that decided who was King, not the King.

Force of Arms obviously played a roll. Swein and Cnut became King of England by conquest but were then legitimized by the Witan. Swein and Cnut passed their claim via Scandinavian practices. But again, we see that with Harthacnut, he waited for the Witan to offer him the crown.

Sacred Oaths and Excommunication

Then there is the “oath.” The Bayeux Tapestry has this image:



Norman sources tell us of Harold swore an oath of allegiance to William to support his claim to the England throne. This could be the knighting ceremony. Part of that oath would have been one of vassalage. Very likely, that oath was taken under duress. Even if Harold intended to keep the oath to help William secure the crown, that was no guarantee that William would be elected. Harold might well have lobbied for William and William was rejected by the Witan.

Additionally, William got sanction from the Pope to invade England. This was not the same pope who gave Harold the relics for his church. Pope Alexander II reigned from 1061 to 1073 and had an active anti-pope working against him. Alexander may have traded his support for William (and Roger of Sicily) in exchange for their support against Honorius the anti-pope. Harold and any who followed him were excommunicated [34].

Why all the trouble?

The big question to me on this issue is that why did William feel he had to go through all of this? Following the example of Swein and Cnut, he could have just invaded. Edward may have promised William England but that too is unlikely. Harold might have sworn an oath but he may

not have. But William needed Harold to betray his oath to get papal sanction because the Norman barons were skittish. William had a bad childhood but was a very strong personality. By this time, he had overcome his problems and was the strongest that he had ever been but his nobles didn't want to invade England [35]. He needed their support for their troops. Papal blessing was just what was needed to convince them to go along with the idea. Much of the post-Conquest propaganda was to remind the Normans of why they did what they did and drive the point home to their new English subjects.

It didn't really work though. Even today, some English take the mead-oath of Harold's huscarls and celebrate their last English king.

“I swear before this company that I shall fight to the death for my King. If my King or my Lord shall die, I shall take his place and fight as he would have fought. If any man here sees me taken with weak heart and run away, he shall remind me of this pledge made here before my kin.”

King Harold Day is now an annual event in Waltham Abbey, Essex with reenactments, falconry, and Morris dancing [36]. Also, after World War II, at Bayeux War Cemetery, the monument to the British war dead reads [37]:

“We, once conquered by William, have now set free the Conqueror's native land.”

Lastly, the Anglo-Saxon royal blood does still flow through the current royal house. Matilda of Scotland marries Henry I. Matilda is Edward the Exile's granddaughter. Barely 40 years after The Conquest, the Anglo-Saxon royal house joins with the Norman royal house. Matilda is descended from Edward the Exile. Queen Elizabeth II can trace back to Matilda through Elizabeth of York who married Henry VII.

Harold the King

As stated above, Edward the Confessor dies on January 5 1066, just as Westminster Abbey is complete. And as stated above, he indicated that Harold should be king. Harold was crowned in Westminster Abbey, the first King to have that honor. He was greeted with wide acclaim by the English.

Harold was well aware of William's intentions from his time there and he probably got messengers from William as well telling him to surrender his throne to William [38].

Harold called up the fyrd and naval levies, in preparation of William's invasion. However, William was not able to invade at this time. The Channel is notorious for bad weather and unfavorable winds kept William on his side. Unfortunately, the fyrd could only be called up for only so long. Harold had to release them.

War was not the only thing Harold was doing though. He issued coinage with “pax” on the obverse. He made several appointments of shire-reeves and at least two abbots. John of Worcester [39] says Harold “began to abolish unjust laws and make good ones” and “to imprison robbers and disturbers of the kingdom.”



On 24 April 1066, Halley’s Comet passed by. In the Bayeux Tapestry, this is the hairy star.



Then, Harold’s younger brother, Tostig brought home a friend; Harald Hardrada.

The Other Harald

Harald Hardrada was King of Norway and felt he also had a claim on England. Harald’s nephew was King Magnus of Norway. Magnus and Cnut had an agreement; if either passed without heir, the other would be able to claim the others land. This probably only really applied to Norway and Denmark but Cnut also had England. Harald really didn’t care for legal or political reasons; he was the last great Viking king and he just liked to fight. And he was really good at it.

Harald left Norway after Cnut conquered Norway and he went to serve in the Varangian Guard and rose to the rank of captain. He became quite wealthy and was an excellent fighter [40]. After his tours in the guard, he returned home to Norway and attempted to purchase or extort part of Norway from Magnus. When Magnus died in 1047, Harald just took Norway and then attempted to conquer Denmark. Swein

of Denmark held him off for 13 years and a truce was called. Tostig was exiled as a result of a Northumbrian revolt against him. Tostig begged for support from many other nobles but Harald was sympathetic.

Tostig and Harald raised a large army of 300 ships for the Invasion. Harold Godwinson raised the fyrd and huscarls and covered 200 miles in 4 days; particularly impressive for the day. Harold's northern earls engaged the Vikings first, without Harold. They suffered a defeat and the Vikings entered York but did not entrench themselves [41]. They moved back to Stamford Bridge.

There are legends about the battle. According to Snorri Sturluson [42], the Vikings were expecting hostages. Harold approached the camp and offered Tostig his earldom back if switched sides. Tostig replied "and what will you offer my Lord, Harald?" Harold replied, "'six feet of English ground, or seven feet as he was taller than other men.'" When the Vikings saw the approaching army, the English army was "glittering like ice" as the sun reflected off their spears and armor.

The first event probably didn't happen but maybe the second did. Harold surprised the Vikings and they didn't have time to put on their armor [43]. It was a long battle but Harold won the day and Tostig and Harald were killed. The Vikings went home on only 24 of the 300 ships they arrived on. Then the winds shifted and William was able to launch his ships.

Battle of Hastings

Harold then quickly marched south to meet William, covering almost 200 miles in a handful of days. It is not my intention to discuss the battle in depth though one could. It was a long battle by medieval standards and there are several times that it could have ended well for the English. Stamford Bridge certainly meant some lost men for the English. Greener troops chased the broken Bretons on William's left. Reinforcements were on the way for the English. Famously, it is said that a stray arrow pierced Harold's eye. The Normans then charged the line and hacked Harold's body to pieces.



According to William of Poitiers [44], "The two brothers of the King were found near him and Harold himself, stripped of all badges of honour, could not be identified by his face but only by certain marks on his body. His corpse was brought into the Duke's camp, and William gave it for burial to William, surnamed Malet, and not to Harold's mother, who offered for the body of her beloved son its weight in gold. For the Duke thought it unseemly to receive money for such merchandise, and equally he considered it wrong that Harold should be buried as his mother wished, since so many men lay unburied because of his avarice. They said in jest that he who had guarded the coast with such insensate zeal should be buried by the seashore".

It is also said that Edith Swannesha had to be called in to identify the body by some mark only she would know as his wife.

Harold may have been buried at a church in Bosham, near his favorite hunting lodge. An exhumation of an Anglo-Saxon coffin at this church in 1954 found a man nearly 60 years old, leg, and lower part of the other leg. The grave site is near the harbor and thus matches with William of Poitiers account. This may have been Harold [45].

There are also legends that he did not die at Hastings but lived out his life as a hermit in either Chester or Canterbury [46].

Harold's mother and sons would continue to harass the Normans from Wessex, Cornwall, Wales, and Ireland for many years before the Conquest was totally complete. One of Harold's daughters marries the Grand Duke of Kiev and becomes mother to Mstislav the Great, the last ruler of united Kievan Rus.

Why 100 years ago?

I started Harold's story more than 100 years before he reigned. Why? I truly feel the events of 1066 had their roots that far back. Edward the Confessor may have been a weak king or he may have been a strong king but he was a king influenced heavily by being raised in the Norman Court of Robert the Magnificent and William the Bastard. If Aethelred had not paid off the Vikings (a tactic that never worked) and hadn't kill off the Danes living in England, Swein and Cnut may not have bothered with England. Harald Hardrada would have no claim to England, but that may not have stopped him. A stronger Aethelred may not have needed to marry Emma of Normandy. Aethelred and sons may not have fled to Normandy at all. Edmund Ironside was a strong king and may have ruled many years. His son Edward the Exile would probably have a different name and may have rule after Edmund. There was still a chance that Edward the Confessor might have been king and maybe a stronger one. He certainly would have been less influenced by the Normans. Harold Godwinson probably never would have been king at all. The What If game can go on forever. But the hint that England could be taken by the right person came from the Ill-Advised so he is where we must start.

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- [7] Ryan Lavelle, *Aethelred II: King of the English*, The History Press, 2008, pp. 169-172
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- [11] DeVries, *The Norwegian Invasion of England*, pp. 79–81
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