

An Account of the Battle of Hastings 1066 by William of Malmesbury

Synopsis

The passing of King Edward III of England (after a reign of 23 years and leaving no heirs) ignited a three-way rivalry for the crown that culminated in the Battle of Hastings.

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



On the other hand, the Normans passed the whole night in confessing their sins, and received the communion of the Lord's body in the morning. Their infantry, with bows and arrows, formed the vanguard, while their cavalry, divided into wings, was placed in the rear. The duke, with serene countenance, declaring aloud that God would favor his as being the righteous side, called for his arms; and when, through the haste of his attendants, he had put on his hauberk the hind part before, he corrected the mistake with a laugh, saying "The power of my dukedom shall be turned into a kingdom." Then starting the Song of Roland, in order that the warlike example of that hero might stimulate the soldiers, and calling on God for assistance, the battle commenced on both sides, and was fought with great ardor, neither side giving ground during the greater part of the day.

Observing this, William gave a signal to his troops, that, feigning flight, they should withdraw from the field. By means of this device the solid phalanx of the English opened for the purpose of cutting down the fleeing enemy and thus brought upon itself swift destruction; for the Normans, facing about, attacked them, thus disordered, and compelled them to fly. In this manner, deceived by a stratagem,



they met an honorable death in avenging their enemy; nor indeed were they at all without their own revenge, for, by frequently making a stand, they slaughtered their pursuers in heaps. Getting possession of an eminence, they drove back the Normans, who in the heat of pursuit were struggling up the slope, into the valley beneath, where, by hurling their javelins and rolling down stones on them as they stood below, the English easily destroyed them to a man. Besides, by a short passage with which they were acquainted, they avoided a deep ditch and trod underfoot such a multitude of their enemies in that place that the heaps of bodies made the hollow level with the plain. This alternating victory, first of one side and then of the other, continued so long as Harold lived to check the retreat; but when he fell, his brain pierced by an arrow, the flight of the English ceased not until night.

In the battle both leaders distinguished themselves by their bravery. Harold, not content with the functions of a general and with exhorting others, eagerly assumed himself the duties of a common soldier. He was constantly striking down the enemy at close quarters, so that no one could approach him with impunity, for straightway both horse and rider would be felled by a single blow. So it was at long range, as I have said, that the enemy's deadly arrow brought him to his death. One of the Norman soldiers gashed his thigh with a sword, as he lay prostrate; for which shameful and cowardly action he was branded with ignominy by William and expelled from the army.



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

This was a fatal day to England, and melancholy havoc was wrought in our dear country during the change of its lords. For it had long adopted the manners of the Angles, which had indeed altered with the times; for in the first years of their arrival they were barbarians in their look and manner, warlike in their usages, heathens in their rights. After embracing the faith of Christ, by degrees and, in process of time, in consequence of the peace which they enjoyed, they relegated arms to a secondary place and gave their whole attention to religion. I am not speaking of the poor, the meanness of whose fortune often restrains them from overstepping the bound of justice; I omit, too, men of ecclesiastical rank, whom sometimes respect for their profession and sometimes the fear of shame suffers not to deviate from the true path; I speak of princes, who from the greatness of their power might have full liberty to indulge in pleasure. Some of these in their own country, and others at Rome, changing their habit, obtained a heavenly kingdom and a saintly intercourse. Many others during their whole lives devoted themselves in outward appearance to worldly affairs, but in order that they might exhaust their treasures on the poor or divide them amongst monasteries.

What shall I say of the multitudes of bishops, hermits, and abbots? Does not the whole island blaze with such numerous relics of its own people that you can scarcely pass a village of any consequence but you hear the name of some new saint? And of how many more has all remembrance perished through the want of records?



Nevertheless, the attention to literature and religion had gradually decreased for several years before the arrival of the Normans. The clergy, contented with a little confused learning, could scarcely stammer out the words of the sacraments; and a person who understood grammar was an object of wonder and astonishment. The monks mocked the rule of their order by fine vestments and the use of every kind of food. The nobility, given up to luxury and wantonness, went not to church in the morning after the manner of Christians, but merely, in a careless manner, heard matins and masses from a hurrying priest in their chambers, amid the blandishments of their wives. The commonalty, left unprotected, became a prey to the most powerful, who amassed fortunes, either by seizing on their property or by selling their persons into foreign countries; although it is characteristic of this people to be more inclined to reveling than to the accumulation of wealth.

Drinking in parties was a universal practice, in which occupation they passed entire nights as well as days. They consumed their whole substance in mean and despicable houses, unlike the Normans and French, who live frugally in noble and splendid mansions. The vices attendant on drunkenness, which enervate the human mind, followed; hence it came about that when they engaged William, with more rashness and precipitate fury than military skill, they doomed themselves and their country to slavery by a single, and that an easy, victory. For nothing is less effective than rashness; and what begins with violence quickly ceases or is repelled.

The English at that time wore short garments, reaching to the mid-knee; they had their hair cropped, their beards shaven, their arms laden with gold bracelets, their skin adorned with tattooed designs. They were accustomed to eat till they became surfeited, and to drink till they were sick. These latter qualities they imparted to their conquerors; as to the rest, they adopted their manners. I would not, however, had these bad propensities ascribed to the English universally; I know that many of the clergy at that day trod the path of sanctity by a blameless life; I know that many of the laity, of all ranks and conditions, in this nation were well-pleasing to God. Be injustice far from this account; the accusation does not involve the whole, indiscriminately; but as in peace the mercy of God often cherishes the bad and the good together, so, equally, does his severity sometimes include them both in captivity.

The Normans that I may speak of them also, were at that time, and are even now, exceedingly particular in their dress and delicate in their food, but not so to excess. They are a race inured to war, and can hardly live without it; fierce in rushing against the enemy, and, where force fails of success, ready to use stratagem or to corrupt by bribery. As I have said, they live in spacious houses with economy, envy their superiors, wish to excel their equals, and plunder their subjects, though they defend them from others; they are faithful to their lords, though a slight offense alienates them. They weigh treachery by its chance of success, and change their sentiments for money. The most hospitable, however, of all nations, they esteem strangers worthy of equal honor with themselves; they also inter-marry with their vassals. They revived, by their arrival, the rule of religion which had everywhere grown lifeless in England. You might see churches rise in every village, and monasteries in the towns and cities, built after a style unknown before; you might behold the country flourishing with renovated rites; so that each wealthy man accounted that day lost to him which he had neglected to signalize by some munificent action.

