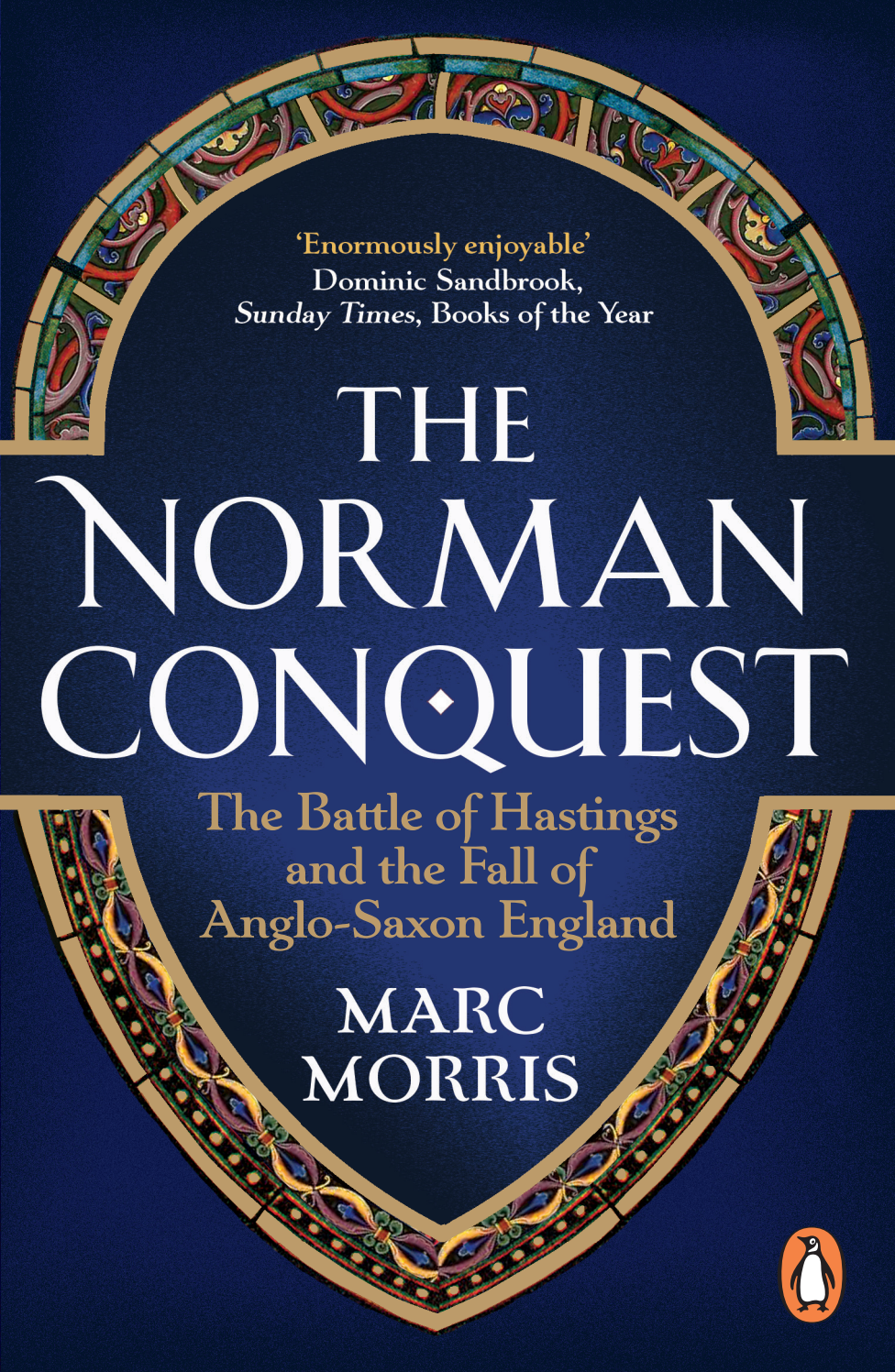

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

A historian of the Middle Ages, Marc Morris's acclaimed books include *King John: Treachery, Tyranny and the Road to Magna Carta* and *The Anglo-Saxons: A History of the Beginnings of England*. He is a fellow of the Royal Historical Society, writes for, among others, *History Today* and *BBC History Magazine*, and appears regularly on radio and television.

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my prince

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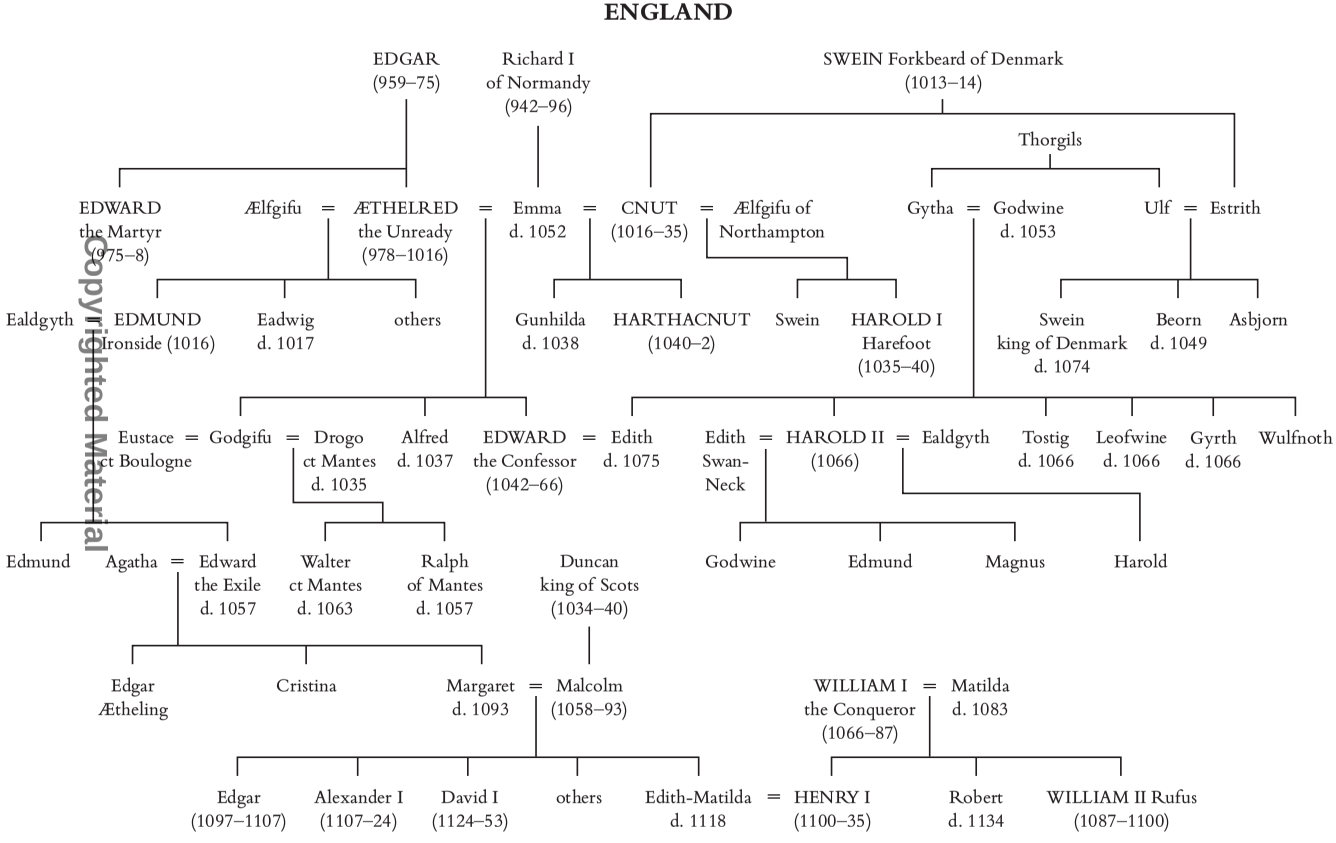
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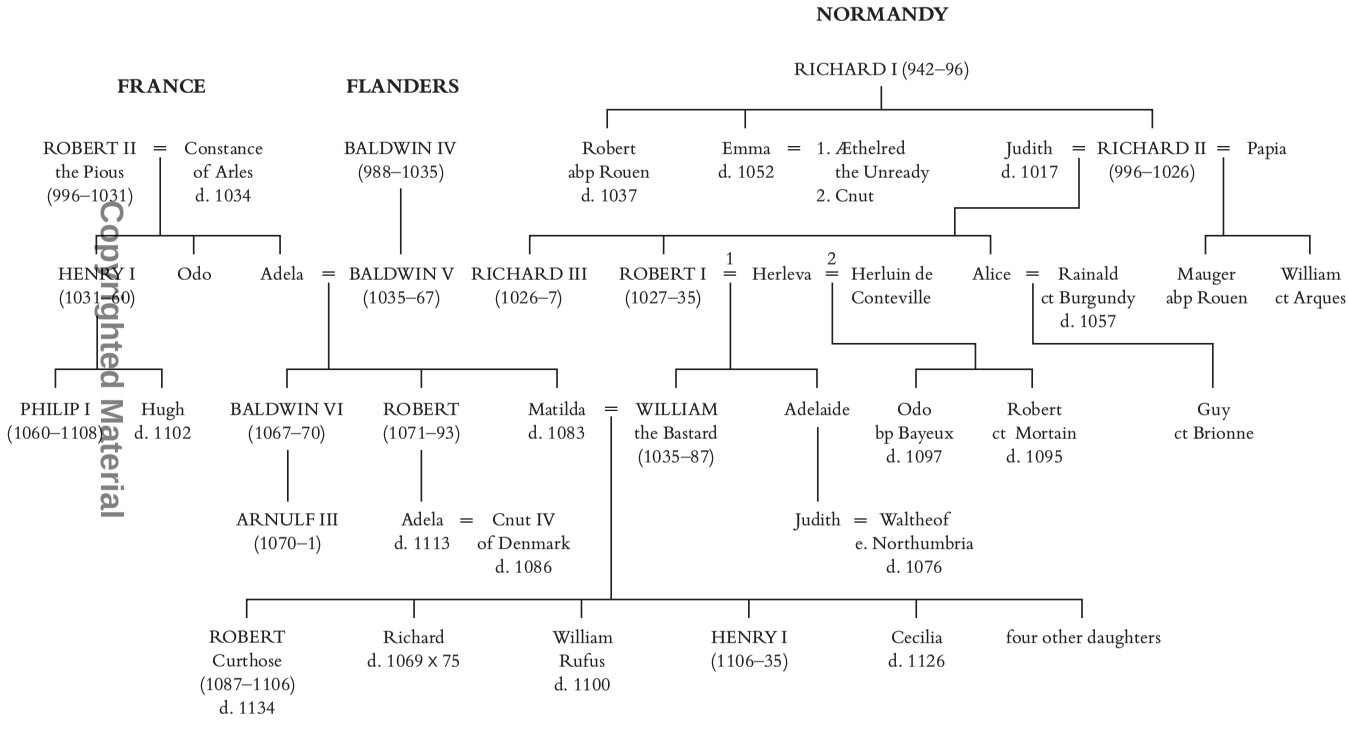


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A Note on Names

Many of the characters in this book have names that can be spelt in a variety of different ways. Swein Estrithson, for example, appears elsewhere as Svein, Sven, Swegn and Swegen, with his surname spelt Estrithson or Estrithsson. There was, of course, no such thing as standard spelling in the eleventh century, so to some extent the modern historian can pick and choose. I have, however, tried to be consistent in my choices and have not attempted to alter them according to nationality: there seemed little sense in having a Gunhilda in England and a Gunnhildr in Denmark. For this reason, I've chosen to refer to the celebrated king of Norway as *Harold* Hardrada rather than the more commonplace Harald, so his first name is the same as that of his English opponent, Harold Godwineson. Contemporaries, after all, considered them to have the same name: the author of the *Life of King Edward*, writing very soon after 1066, calls them 'namesake kings'.

When it comes to toponymic surnames I have been rather less consistent. Most of the time I have used 'of', as in Roger of Montgomery and William of Jumièges, but occasionally I have felt bound by convention to stick with the French 'de'. Try as I might, I could not happily write about William of Warenne in this book, any more than I could have referred to Simon of Montfort in its predecessor.

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Illustrations

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Edward the Confessor: detail from the Bayeux Tapestry (*Musée de la Tapisserie, Bayeux*). Photo: The Bridgeman Art Library

William of Jumièges presents his history to William the Conqueror (*Bibliothèque municipale de Rouen, MS Y. 14 (CGM 1174), fol. 116*). Photo: Thierry Ascencio-Parvy

Cnut and Emma present a cross to the New Minster, Winchester (*British Library, Stowe MS. 944, fol. 6*). Photo: akg-images / British Library

Harold rides to Bosham Church: detail from the Bayeux Tapestry (*Musée de la Tapisserie, Bayeux*). Photo: The Bridgeman Art Library

The tower of All Saint's Church, Earls Barton, Northamptonshire. Photo: © Laurence Burridge

Arques-la-Bataille. Photo: © Vincent Tournaire

Jumièges Abbey. Photo: Robert Harding

St Stephen's, Caen. Photo: © Achim Bednorz

The Normans cross the Channel: detail from the Bayeux Tapestry (*Musée de la Tapisserie, Bayeux*). Photo: The Bridgeman Art Library

Skuldelev 3 (*Viking Ship Museum, Roskilde, Denmark*). Photo: Robert Harding

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Normans burning a house: detail from the Bayeux Tapestry (*Musée de la Tapisserie, Bayeux*). Photo: The Bridgeman Art Library

The Normans charge the English shield-wall at Hastings: detail from the Bayeux Tapestry (*Musée de la Tapisserie, Bayeux*). Photo: The Bridgeman Art Library

Odo of Bayeux at Hastings: detail from the Bayeux Tapestry. Musée de la Tapisserie, Bayeux. Photo: The Bridgeman Art Library

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The field of Hastings and Battle Abbey. Photo: © English Heritage Photo Library

Berkhamsted Castle. Photo: © Skyscan Balloon Photography

Pickering Castle. Photo: © English Heritage Photo Library

Winchester Cathedral. Photo: © Skyscan.co.uk

A penny of William I (*by permission of the Syndics of The Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge*). Photo: The Bridgeman Art Library

Chepstow Castle, the Great Tower. Photo: © Cadw, Welsh Assembly Government (Crown Copyright)

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The White Tower, Tower of London. Photo: Historic Royal Palaces

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Great and Little Domesday. Photo: © The National Archives, London

The Domesday Book, page showing Bedfordshire (*The National Archives, London*). Photo: Mary Evans Picture Library

Durham Cathedral (*Collection du Musée historique de Lausanne*). Photo: © Claude Huber

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Introduction

There have been many attempts to tell the story of the Norman Conquest during the past millennium, but none of them as successful as the contemporary version that told it in pictures.

We are talking, of course, about the Bayeux Tapestry, perhaps the most famous and familiar of all medieval sources, at least in England, where we are introduced to it as schoolchildren, and where we encounter it everywhere as adults: in books and on bookmarks, postcards and calendars, cushions and tea towels, key rings, mouse-mats and mugs. It is pastiched in films and on television; it is parodied in newspapers and magazines. No other document in English history enjoys anything like as much commercial exploitation, exposure and affection.[1]

The Tapestry is a frieze or cartoon, only fifty centimetres wide but nearly seventy metres long, that depicts the key events leading up to and including the Norman invasion of England in 1066. Properly speaking it is not a tapestry at all, because tapestries are woven; technically it is an embroidery, since its designs are sewn on to its plain linen background. Made very soon after the Conquest, it has been kept since the late fifteenth century (and probably a lot longer) in the Norman city of Bayeux, where it can still be seen today.

And there they are: the Normans! Hurling themselves fearlessly into battle, looting the homes of their enemies, building castles, burning castles, feasting, fighting, arguing, killing and conquering. Clad in mail shirts, carrying kite-shaped shields, they brandish swords, but more often spears, and wear their distinctive pointed helmets with fixed, flat nasals. Everywhere we look we see horses – more than

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200 in total – being trotted, galloped and charged. We also see ships (forty-one of them) being built, boarded and sailed across the Channel. There is Duke William of Normandy, later to be known as William the Conqueror, his face clean-shaven and his hair cropped close up the back, after the fashion favoured by his fellow Norman knights. There is his famous half-brother, Odo of Bayeux, riding into the thick of the fray even though he was a bishop.

And there, too, are their opponents, the English. Similarly brave and warlike, they are at the same time visibly different. Sporting longer hair and even longer moustaches, they also ride horses but not into battle, where instead they stand to fight, wielding fearsome, long-handled axes. There is Harold Godwineson, soon to be King Harold, riding with his hawk and hounds, sitting crowned and enthroned, commanding the English army at Hastings and – as everybody remembers – being felled by an arrow that strikes him in the eye.

When you see the Tapestry in all its extensive, multicoloured glory, you can appreciate in an instant why it is so important. This is not only an account of the Norman invasion of 1066; it is a window on to the world of the eleventh century. No other source takes us so immediately and so vividly back to that lost time. The scenes of battle are justly famous, and can tell us much about arms, armour and military tactics. But look elsewhere and you discover a wealth of arresting detail about many other aspects of eleventh-century life: ships and shipbuilding, civilian dress for both men and women, architecture and agriculture. It is thanks to the Tapestry that we have some of the earliest images of Romanesque churches and earth-and-timber castles. Quite incidentally, in one of its border scenes, it includes the first portrayal in European art of a plough being drawn by a horse.[2]

Precise information about the Tapestry's creation is entirely lacking, but it is as good as certain that it was made within a decade or so of the events it depicts, and that its place of manufacture was Canterbury (many of its scenes and motifs are based on illustrations in surviving Canterbury manuscripts). We can be almost as certain – despite a host of other far less convincing candidates having been proposed over the years – that its patron was the aforementioned Bishop Odo, who is self-importantly portrayed throughout as being the driving force behind the planning and execution of the invasion.

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Odo's patronage, of course, would explain how the Tapestry came to reside in Bayeux, his episcopal city, and also fits well with its creation in Canterbury, since he was made earl of Kent immediately after the Conquest.[3]

By any law of averages, the Tapestry ought not to exist. We know that such elaborate wall-hangings, while hardly commonplace in the eleventh century, were popular enough with the elite that could afford them, because we have descriptions in contemporary documents. What we *don't* have are other surviving examples: all that comes down to us in other cases are a few sorry-looking scraps. That the Tapestry is still with us almost 1,000 years after it was sewn is astonishing, especially when one considers its later history. It first appears in the written record four centuries after its creation, in 1476, when it is described in an inventory of the treasury at Bayeux Cathedral, from which we learn that the clergy were in the habit of hanging it around the nave every year during the first week of July (an annual airing that would have aided its conservation). Its survival through those four medieval centuries, escaping the major hazards of war, fire and flood, as well as the more mundane menaces of rodents, insects and damp, is wondrous enough; that it successfully avoided destruction during the modern era is nothing short of miraculous. When the cathedral's treasury was looted during the French Revolution, the Tapestry came within a hair's breadth of being cut up and used to cover military wagons. Carted to Paris for exhibition by Napoleon, it was eventually returned to Bayeux, where for several years during the early nineteenth century it was indifferently stored in the town hall on a giant spindle, so that curious visitors could unroll it (and occasionally cut bits off). During the Second World War it had yet more adventures: taken again to Paris by the Nazis, it narrowly escaped being sent to Berlin, and somehow managed to emerge unscathed from the flames and the bombs. The Tapestry's post-medieval history is a book in itself – one which, happily, has already been written.[4]

And yet, wonderful as it is in its own right, the Tapestry is not without its limitations as a historical source. In the first place, despite its remarkable condition, it is sadly incomplete, breaking off abruptly after the death of King Harold. Secondly, as we have already noted, some of its scenes are drawn not from observation but copied from illustrations in older manuscripts, which obviously greatly reduces

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their value if we are concerned about recovering historical reality. Thirdly, despite the fact it seems to have been made for a Norman patron, the Tapestry is curiously (and probably deliberately) non-committal in its portrayal of events; although most of its scenes have captions, these too are for the most part wilfully obscure or ambiguous. Take, for example, the question of when it begins: most historians believe that the story starts in 1064, but the fact that they cannot say for certain is indicative of the wider problem. Lastly, the story that the Tapestry tells is inevitably selective and in places demonstrably inaccurate; some events are left out and others are deliberately distorted. No other source, for example, suggests that Harold swore his famous oath to William at Bayeux, or that it was Odo who heroically turned the tide for the Normans during the Battle of Hastings. The Tapestry, it bears repeating, is really an embroidery.[5]

We are able to expose such distortions in the Tapestry's story because, fortunately, we have other sources to help us work out what happened: documentary ones such as chronicles, charters and letters, as well as non-documentary ones in the form of art, architecture and archaeology. Scholars who study the Early Middle Ages (the half-millennium, say, before 1066) will tell you that collectively these sources constitute an immensely rich corpus – and this is true, at least in comparison with other regions of Europe in the eleventh century, and with earlier centuries in England. But then scholars who work in these fields can usually get all their primary source material on a single shelf and still have room for ornaments. To scholars who cut their teeth studying later medieval centuries (or to this one at least) the sources for the Norman Conquest can sometimes seem woefully impoverished.

As an example – one I've used in tones of increasing despair while writing this book – consider the evidence base for eleventh-century English kings compared with their thirteenth-century successors. My previous book was about Edward I, who ruled England from 1272 to 1307, a period of thirty-five years. Thanks to a massive number of surviving government documents from that time – literally thousands of closely written parchment rolls – we can say where Edward was for almost every day of his reign: his itinerary, compiled and published in the 1970s, runs to three large volumes of print. Now compare and contrast the itinerary of William the Conqueror, king of England from 1066 to 1087: expressed in

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terms of precise dates and places, it runs to a grand total of three printed pages. Most of the time, we simply have no idea where William was; sometimes we cannot even say for certain whether he was in England or Normandy at any given point. This is because, apart from the Domesday Book (the other miraculous survival in this story), government archive from the Conqueror's reign is non-existent. Where we have official documents it is because they have been kept or copied by other institutions – chiefly by monasteries that received charters from the king commemorating and confirming grants of land or other privileges. Naturally, at a distance of over 900 years, the survival rate for such documents is not good. And even where such documents have survived, they are rarely dated more precisely than the particular year they were issued, and often not dated at all. The upshot is that, in the case of William the Conqueror – one of the most famous figures in English history, and obviously a major character in this book – we are barely able to say where he was from one year to the next.[6]

Fortunately, given this dearth of administrative documents, we also have chronicles – again, mostly thanks to the diligence of monks. These contemporary histories can help put considerable amounts of flesh on what would otherwise be very bare bones, providing us with facts, dates, anecdotes and opinions. The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, our most important source for the history of England during this period, has much to say about events before and after the Conquest, and without it our understanding would be infinitely poorer. At the same time, the Chronicle can on occasion remain infuriatingly tight-lipped. Its entry for the year 1084, for instance, reproduced in full, reads: 'In this year passed away Wulfwold, abbot of Chertsey, on 19 April.' For other years – crucial years – it has no entries at all.[7]

Another major problem with contemporary accounts is their bias. All of the writers in this period are churchmen, and as such are prone to interpreting the turn of events as the unfolding of God's will. More insuperably, some of these accounts are extremely partisan. The story of the Conquest is full of dramatic reversals of fortune and often quite despicable deeds; in several instances, the key players in the drama sought to justify their actions by commissioning what are essentially propaganda pieces. Some of our most important sources, including the Bayeux Tapestry, fall into this category and have to be handled with extreme caution.

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Because of the shortcomings of the source material, it is often difficult, and sometimes impossible, to say exactly what happened – which, of course, makes it tough if you are trying to construct a narrative history. For this reason, many books about the Conquest concentrate on a discussion of the sources themselves, examining them from every angle, and explaining how different historians have arrived at different interpretations. Some of these books are excellent, but others are a bewildering mix of analysis and opinion, some strictly contemporary, some slightly later, some drawn from earlier scholarship and some the author's own, the overall effect of which is to leave the reader confused and exhausted, unsure about who or what to believe. The alternative approach is to tell the story in an entirely straightforward fashion, banishing all debate and controversy to the back of the book. Such was the method of Edward Augustus Freeman, who wrote a giant history of the Norman Conquest in the late nineteenth century. As he explained in a letter to a friend, serious academic discussion was strictly for the appendices: 'I have to make my text a narrative which I hope may be intelligible to girls and curates.'[8]

Not wanting to baffle the uninitiated, but equally anxious not to offend female readers or members of the lower clergy, I have tried to steer a middle course between these two extremes, and create what might be called a justified narrative. Rather than discuss all the source material separately at the end of the book, I have introduced each source as the story progresses – without, I hope, sacrificing too much forward momentum.

Readers can rest assured I haven't left out the juicy bits. I say this because there are some who assume that historians seek to keep these bits to themselves, like the best silver, to be brought out only in academic seminars. If I had a pound for every time I've heard a comment along the lines of 'I would have liked to know more about his wife/children/private life/emotional state', I might not be a rich man, but I would probably be able to go out for a nice meal. We would *all* like to know more about these topics, but for the most part they remain closed to us. One of the frustrations of travelling back almost a millennium into the past is precisely that many of the characters we encounter are two-dimensional. Often they are no more than names on a page – shadows cast by a single, flickering flame. There are *kings* in this story for whom we do not possess a

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reliable contemporary description – not even so much as an adjective. Any attempt to discuss their personalities would be idle speculation. As William of Poitiers, our most important Norman source, explains at one point, poets are allowed to amplify their knowledge in any way they like by roaming through the fields of fiction. So too are the historical novelists of our own day, and goodness knows there are enough of them if such invented detail is desired. In this respect alone I sympathize with Professor Freeman (an otherwise deeply unsympathetic character) who, having completed his massive six-volume history of the Conquest, received an enquiry from a painter, wanting to know what the weather had been like on the day of the Battle of Hastings. 'What odd things people do ask!' he exclaimed in a letter to a friend. 'As if I should not have put it into my story if I had known.'[9]

So I've put in the good stuff where it is known. I have also tried to be as fair and balanced as possible. There is still a widespread assumption with the Norman Conquest that the Normans are 'them' and the English are 'us'. The Normans, it goes without saying, are the villains of the piece, responsible for introducing into England bad things like feudalism and the class system. The notion persists that pre-Conquest England had been a much nicer place – freer, more liberal, with representative institutions and better rights for women. Thus the Conquest is still regarded in many quarters a national tragedy.[10]

But almost all of this is myth. It arises not from contemporary evidence, but from opinions passed on the Conquest in later centuries. In the case of the status of women, it arose as recently as the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, when it was argued that before the coming of the Normans women had better legal rights, allowing them to control their own property and to have a say in whom they married. The period before 1066 was imagined as a golden age, when women and men rubbed shoulders in rough and ready equality, only to be ended by the coming of the nasty Normans. Latterly, however, these arguments have been comprehensively discredited. The reality is that women were no worse off under the Normans than they had been under the Anglo-Saxons; they simply had a bad time both before and after 1066.[11]

Certainly, Englishmen at the time were extremely sore about being conquered by the Normans. 'They built castles far and wide

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throughout the land, oppressing the unhappy people, and things went ever from bad to worse,' wept the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle in 1067. 'When God wills may the end be good!' But, as we shall see, the English had largely overcome these feelings by the end of the twelfth century. The notion that the Conquest ushered in new and enduring forms of oppression for Englishmen is the work of writers and propagandists working in later periods. It began to develop as early as the thirteenth century, when Normandy and England were once again ruled by different dynasties, after which time the English began to develop a hatred of France that lasted for the rest of the Middle Ages and beyond. It was given a further twist in the seventeenth century, in the struggle between Parliament and Crown, when Parliamentarians went looking for a golden age of English liberties, found it in the Anglo-Saxon era, and declared the absolutism of the Crown to be a Norman creation. Although this view was challenged at the time, Parliament's triumph ensured that it remained the dominant one for the next two centuries. It was championed by Freeman who, like many men of his day and age, despised everything French and Norman and considered all things German and Anglo-Saxon to be pure and virtuous. Freeman's *History of the Norman Conquest* was, indeed, so obviously biased in favour of the English that it provoked instant reaction from other academics, most notably John Horace Round, who spoke up in defence of the Normans.[12] Since then scholars have tended to support one side or the other, Saxon or Norman, even to the extent of declaring which side they would have fought on had they been present at Hastings.[13]

Some readers may come away with the impression that, in the unlikely event of having to choose, I would line up with the Normans; if so it would only be because I know that they are going to win. I have no particular fondness for William and his followers. Like all conquerors, they come across as arrogant, warlike and inordinately pleased with themselves, as well as (in this particular case) holier than thou. But, at the same time, I don't much care for the English either, as they were in the eleventh century, with their binge drinking, slavery and political murders. Whoever these people were, they are not 'us'. They are our forebears from 1,000 years ago – as are the Normans. At the risk of sounding more pious than the most reformed Norman churchman, it is high time that we stopped taking sides.

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Needless to say, however, I still think the Conquest is hugely important; indeed, I would agree with those historians who continue to regard it as the single most important event in English history.[14] Many of the traditional claims made for the Normans, it is true, have been overturned in recent decades. Some of the things we once thought had been changed by their coming have been shown to have changed at other times and for other reasons, or simply not to have changed at all. Nobody now thinks that the Conquest introduced the nucleated village or much affected the development of the parish system; it is generally thought to have had little long-term effect on existing political structures, the economy or the arts.

But even as these questions have been settled on the side of continuity, other areas have been shown to have experienced dramatic change. Not only did the Normans bring with them new forms of architecture and fortification, new military techniques, a new ruling elite and a new language of government; they also imported a new set of attitudes and morals, which impinged on everything from warfare to politics to religion to law, and even the status of the peasantry. Many of these changes could be grouped under the heading 'national identity'. The Conquest matters, in short, because it altered what it meant to be English.[15]

One last thing: this book is about the impact of the Normans on England, not about their impact in general. The Normans had all sorts of other exciting adventures in the course of the eleventh century, invading both Italy and Sicily and, eventually, as participants in the First Crusade, the Holy Land. These adventures are not part of this story, which is focused on the Conquest of 1066. This means we will look at events in Normandy and France up to that point, but not have much room for events in these regions thereafter. Also, because the book concentrates on England, we will not have much to say about the other countries and peoples in the British Isles. In recent decades there have been many brilliant books and articles reminding us always to consider the British Isles as a whole, and not just as England and its 'Celtic Fringe'. The Normans did have an enormous impact on the peoples of Wales and Scotland – eventually. In the first generation after 1066, however, that impact was minimal. Some contemporary Celtic chroniclers failed even to register the Conquest, or noted it only in passing as something that was happening elsewhere that would not affect them. Events would

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soon prove them wrong, but they are events that fall outside the time span of this story.[16]

Stories have to stop somewhere. The Bayeux Tapestry stops with the death of Harold, but only because the original ending is lost. Most scholars assume that in its complete state the Tapestry stretched a little further, and probably concluded with the coronation of William the Conqueror at Christmas 1066. This story also stops with William, but it stretches a good deal further, ending with the king's death in 1087.

Similarly, stories have to have a beginning. The Tapestry begins not long before the Norman invasion, with events that probably took place in 1064. To tell our story properly, we must necessarily go back much further. But, again, we do start with the same person.

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1

The Man Who Would Be King

The Bayeux Tapestry begins with three men in conversation, two standing and one seated. The standing men are not identified, but the seated figure carries a sceptre and wears a crown, while above his head the caption reads '*Edward Rex*' – King Edward. Today he is known, more conveniently, as Edward the Confessor. His memorable byname arose in 1161, almost a hundred years after his death, when he was recognized as a saint by the pope. The pope was satisfied that Edward had performed miracles while alive, and that miracles had continued to occur after his death.[1]

From the record of events in his own day, Edward does not appear to have been particularly saintly. There are suggestions in contemporary sources that he may have been more pious than most, but otherwise he seems to have cut a typical, indeed unexceptional, figure. He lived a fairly long life by medieval standards, dying in his early sixties. On the Tapestry he is shown as an old man with a long white beard, and his death forms one of the most important scenes. The date of his death – 5 January 1066 – is enough to indicate that he is crucial to our story. But in order to understand that story properly, we need to travel back to his youth, and explore how he came to be king of England in the first place. It is a remarkable tale – the one aspect of his career that is indubitably miraculous.

England at the start of the eleventh century was a country both old and new. Old, because its roots stretched back into a distant past, when tribes of Germanic peoples, now collectively known as the Anglo-Saxons, had begun migrating to the island of Britain in the

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fifth century. Fierce warriors, these newcomers eventually made themselves masters of southern and eastern Britain, defeating the native Celtic peoples, subjugating them and driving them into the upland regions to the north and west. In the areas where the Anglo-Saxons settled, new kingdoms had arisen, the names of which are still familiar as the counties and regions of today: Kent, Sussex and Essex; East Anglia, Mercia and Northumbria. Pagan at first, the rulers of these kingdoms began to convert to Christianity from the end of the sixth century, and so in time did their peoples.[2]

But in the ninth century, this galaxy of competing kingdoms was destroyed by new invaders – the Vikings. Despite attempts to rehabilitate them in recent times, the Vikings, with their lust for blood and glory and their gruesome human sacrifices, were not surprisingly regarded with horror by the settled Anglo-Saxons, who witnessed their monasteries being torched, their gold and silver treasures being looted, their precious illuminated manuscripts being destroyed, their young men and women being led away as slaves, and anyone else who stood in the way being mercilessly put to the sword. One by one the several kingdoms of the Anglo-Saxons fell: first Northumbria, then East Anglia, and finally even Mercia, the mightiest kingdom of all, collapsed in the face of the Viking onslaught.[3]

But the kingdom of Wessex endured. Led first by the celebrated King Alfred the Great, and afterwards by his sons and grandsons, the people of the most southerly Anglo-Saxon kingdom at first doggedly defended themselves, and then successfully fought back. And not just in Wessex. During the first half of the tenth century, the West Saxon kings became the conquerors, pushing their frontier northwards, driving the Vikings into retreat, and bringing the neighbouring peoples of Mercia and East Anglia under their dominion. In 954, the Viking capital of York finally fell, and the lands north of the Humber were also annexed by the heirs of Alfred.

In driving the Vikings out, the kings of Wessex had forged a powerful new state. As their armies had advanced, their conquests had been cemented by the foundation of fortified towns, known as *burhs* (boroughs), around which they had established new administrative districts, or shires. Where there had once been several, competing kingdoms there was now a single source of authority. Henceforth the various Anglo-Saxon peoples would swear an oath to one king,

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and live under one law; they would use a single silver coinage and worship a single Christian God.

But, having conquered, the kings of Wessex took care not to be seen as conquerors. Anxious not to alienate his new Anglian subjects, Alfred had urged them to forget their former differences, and emphasized the common Christian culture that united them against the pagan hordes they were fighting. Diplomatically he was not a *rex saxonum* in his charters but a *rex angul-saxonum*, and his people were collectively described as the *angelcynn*. In a further effort to promote unity, he also stressed their common history, commissioning a chronicle that would circulate around the kingdom's major monasteries. Remarkably, this Anglo-Saxon Chronicle (as it was later known) was written not in Latin, as was the practice in virtually every other literate corner of Europe, but in the everyday language that people spoke. By the end of the tenth century, this language had a name for the new state: it was 'the land of the Angles', *Engla lond*.[4]

Such was the kingdom, at once ancient and modern, that Edward the Confessor would eventually inherit. Dynastically speaking, his credentials for doing so were impeccable, for he had been born into the royal family at some point between 1002 and 1005, a direct descendant of King Alfred (his great-great-great-grandfather). Statistically speaking, however, Edward's chances must have seemed vanishingly slim, for he was the product of a second marriage: six older half-brothers were already waiting in line ahead of him in the queue for the succession. And yet, at the time of Edward's arrival, it would have been rash to have placed a bet on any particular candidate, because the world was once again being turned upside down. A decade or so earlier, the Vikings had come back.

They came at first in small parties, as they had done in the past, testing the waters, raiding and then retreating with their loot. But in 991 a large Viking horde had landed at Maldon in Essex and defeated the overconfident English army that had set out to meet them, and from then on the Vikings had returned to burn, pillage and plunder on a more or less annual basis; by the time of Edward's birth, the violence had become almost a matter of routine. Under the year 1006, the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle records that the Vikings 'did as they had been wont to do: they harried, burned and slew as they went'. The citizens of Winchester, Wessex's ancient capital, 'could watch an arrogant and confident host passing their gates on its way

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to the coast, bringing provisions and treasures from a distance of more than fifty miles inland'.[5]

Why did the powerful kingdom of England, so good at expelling the Vikings in the tenth century, fail to repel them in the eleventh? In part it was because the Vikings who came in the second wave did so as part of bigger, better equipped and better organized armies: the giant circular fortresses they built around this time in their homelands at Trelleborg and elsewhere give some indication of their power. But Viking success was also caused by an abject failure of leadership in English society, beginning at the very top, with Edward's father, Æthelred.

Just as Edward has his famous cognomen 'the Confessor', so too his father will forever be remembered as Æthelred 'the Unready'. As it stands, 'unready' is a pretty fair description of Æthelred's level of preparedness for Viking attack and kingship in general. In actual fact, however, 'unready' is a modern misreading of his original nickname, which was the Old English word *unraed*, meaning 'ill-counselled' or 'ill-advised'. (It was a pun on the king's Christian name, which meant 'noble counsel'.)[6]

That Æthelred was ill-advised is not open to doubt: the king himself admitted as much in a charter of 993, in which he blamed the mistakes of his youth on the greed of men who had led him astray. From that point on he put more faith in peaceable churchmen, but they regarded the Viking attacks as divine punishment, and thus saw the solution as spiritual reform: more prayers, more gifts to the Church, and, in the meantime, large payments of tribute to persuade the invaders to go away. Naturally, this last policy only encouraged the Vikings to come back for more. At length – by the time his son Edward was a small boy – Æthelred embarked on a more confrontational policy. In 1008, says the Chronicle, 'the king gave orders that ships should be speedily built throughout the whole kingdom'. But this shift coincided with Æthelred placing his trust in his most discreditable counsellor of all, the contemptible Eadric 'the Grabber' (Streona), who had risen to power at court by having his rivals variously dispossessed, mutilated and murdered. The result was that the English aristocracy was riven by feud and rivalry, with disastrous consequences. When the newly constructed fleet, for instance, eventually put to sea, arguments broke out between the two factions; twenty ships deserted, then attacked and destroyed the others.

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And so the Viking attacks continued. Large areas of the country were ravaged in both 1009 and 1010. In 1011, the invaders besieged Canterbury and carried off the archbishop; when he refused to be ransomed the following year they killed him, drunkenly pelting him with ox heads and bones. 'All these disasters befell us', says the Chronicle, 'through bad counsel [that word *unraedas* again], in that they were never offered tribute in time, nor fought against, but when they had done most to our injury, peace and truce were made with them; and for all this they journeyed anyway in war bands everywhere, and harried our wretched people, and plundered and killed them.'

The end came in 1013, when the Vikings came led by the king of Denmark himself. Swein Forkbeard, as he was known, had raided several times in the past, but this time his ambition was outright conquest. Landing in Lincolnshire, he quickly took the north of England, then the Midlands, and finally Wessex. Æthelred, holed up in London as his kingdom collapsed, had just enough presence of mind to get his two youngest sons, Edward and his brother Alfred, out of the country. A few weeks later, having spent what must have been a miserable Christmas on the Isle of Wight, the king himself followed them overseas. England had been conquered by the Vikings, and its ancient royal family were in exile – in Normandy.

On the face of it, Normandy might seem a strange place for anyone to go in order to escape the Vikings, because it had begun life as a Viking colony. At the start of the tenth century, having been dissuaded from attacking England by the kings of Wessex, a group of Norsemen had crossed to France and concentrated on ravaging the area around Rouen. Like the Vikings who had visited England a generation earlier, these invaders arrived intending to stay; they differed from their cousins in England in that they were successful. Try as they might, the kings, dukes and counts of France could not dislodge their new Scandinavian neighbours; by the end of the tenth century, the Viking rulers of Rouen controlled an area equivalent to the former French province of Neustria. But by then it had acquired a new name. It was now Normannia, 'the land of the Norseman'.[7]

For Æthelred and his sons, however, it was not a case of 'out of the frying pan, into the fire', because in that century since their first arrival, the Norsemen of Normandy had been evolving rapidly. It

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was obvious from their names. Their first leader bore the suitably-Viking name of Rollo, or Hrolfr. His son and grandson, by contrast, had been given the French names William and Richard. They had also (as their new names imply) converted from paganism to Christianity. Gradually their followers did the same, shedding their Viking ways and adopting Continental ones. They learned to speak French, increasingly using it instead of their original Norse tongue, and their leaders began to style themselves with French titles: 'count' at first, and then, when they were feeling even grander, 'duke'. Eventually, they ceased fighting to expand Normandy's borders and entered into more settled relations with their neighbours. Counts William and Richard, for example, were both married to French princesses.

The extent to which Normandy had cast off its connections to the Viking north, a vexed question for modern historians, was also a matter of great moment to King Æthelred.[8] When, at the start of his reign, the Vikings had returned to England after their long absence, they naturally looked upon Rouen as a friendly port of call. It was a handy place to put in for repairs during the winter, and plunder from England – gold, silver and slaves – could be conveniently unloaded there for profit rather than sailed all the way back to Scandinavia. Æthelred was understandably keen to dissuade the Normans from engaging in this trade; he tried both force (an unsuccessful attack on Normandy) and diplomacy (a treaty in 991), but neither had much long-term success in reducing the number of Viking fleets that put into Rouen laden with English loot. The king's diplomatic initiative did, however, have one result with far-reaching consequences. In the spring of 1002, Æthelred agreed to marry the sister of the new Norman duke, Richard II. Her name was Emma.

It is difficult, of course, to assess people's personalities, never mind their personal relationships, at a distance of 1,000 years, but it is probably fair to say that, despite the participation of papal legates, the marriage of Æthelred and Emma was not a match made in heaven. The couple, it is true, got on well enough to produce three children: Edward, the future Confessor, his brother Alfred, and their sister, Godgifu. But since Æthelred had six sons by a previous marriage, the production of more male heirs was hardly a top priority. The match with Emma was intended to stop Vikings seeking shelter

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in Normandy, and this it signally failed to do. Only when the Vikings decided to conquer England in 1013 did Æthelred belatedly reap some benefit from having taken a Continental bride, which was, of course, a convenient cross-Channel bolt-hole. Whether Emma had any part in suggesting or arranging his reception is unclear. Tellingly, perhaps, the Chronicle records that she made her own way to Normandy, travelling separately from both her children and her husband.

In the event, Æthelred's exile was remarkably short. Just a few weeks after his arrival in Normandy, his supplanter, King Swein, died suddenly, leaving the question of who would succeed him in suspense. The Viking army, camped in Lincolnshire, immediately declared in favour of Swein's teenage son, but the English magnates decided to give Æthelred a second chance, and sent messengers inviting him to come home – but on conditional terms. According to the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, they declared (in a phrase that provides one of the most damning indictments of Æthelred's rule) that 'no lord was dearer to them than their rightful lord, if only he would govern his kingdom more justly than he had done in the past'.

Æthelred, being in no real position to negotiate, naturally accepted. If his subjects took him back, he promised, 'he would be a gracious lord to them, and would remedy each one of the things which they all abhorred, and everything should be forgiven'. As a mark of his sincerity, the messengers who conveyed the king's acceptance back to England were accompanied by his son, the youthful Edward the Confessor. 'A complete and friendly agreement was reached and ratified with word and pledge on every side', said the Chronicle, adding that shortly afterwards Æthelred himself crossed the Channel and was joyfully received by his subjects. In this new-found mood of national unity, the king achieved the one notable military success of his career, leading an army into Lincolnshire and driving the Danes out.[9]

Once they were gone, however, the mood of English co-operation quickly evaporated; very soon Æthelred was back to his old ways. The year after his return saw a fresh round of killings at court, orchestrated, as before, by his henchman, Eadric the Grabber. But the king's attempt to neutralize his enemies served only to increase divisions: his eldest son by his first marriage, Edmund, now emerged

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as the champion of a party of opposition. By September 1015, England was once again in total disarray; Æthelred was ill, and his heir apparent was in rebellion. It was at this moment that the Vikings returned, led by their new king, Cnut.

Today Cnut is generally remembered only for the story, first told in the twelfth century, that he once sat on the shore and ordered the waves not to wet him. This has the unfortunate effect of making him appear a comical character, which was anything but the case. 'In your rage, Cnut, you mustered the red shields at sea', sang a contemporary Norse poet, describing the invasion of 1015. 'Dwellings and houses you burned, Prince, as you advanced, young though you were.' When he had been forced to flee England the previous year and return to Scandinavia, Cnut had signalled his disappointment at English disloyalty by stopping off en route at Sandwich to unload the hostages taken by his father, minus their hands, ears and noses.[10]

With his return in 1015, a long-drawn-out and bloody struggle for England's throne ensued. The English remained paralysed by their own rivalries until the following April, at which point Æthelred made an invaluable contribution to the war effort by dropping dead, clearing the way for Edmund to succeed him. For six months the new king led a spirited resistance – not for nothing was he later dubbed Edmund Ironside. Battle followed battle, and the Danes mostly had the worst of the fighting. In the end, however, the English cause was again fatally compromised by treachery. Eadric the Grabber, having gone over to Cnut at the first opportunity, had rejoined Edmund's army in 1016 when the tide seemed to be turning. But when the two armies engaged in Essex in October that year, Eadric deserted again, ensuring a decisive Viking victory. Edmund's death the following month, perhaps from wounds sustained in battle, ended all talk of truce and any hope of an English recovery. The crown passed to Cnut, and England once again had a Danish king.

In these dramatic, fast-moving events, the young Edward the Confessor finds no place. We can assume, from his role in the negotiations for his father's return, that he was in England during these years, though we can safely dismiss the later Scandinavian legend that imagined him fighting alongside his half-brother Edmund, and at one point almost carving Cnut in two (at this time Edward was still no more than thirteen years old). With Cnut's victory it became imperative for Edward and the rest of his family to flee the country

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again. As the mutilated hostages of 1014 would no doubt have attested, the new king was not a man from whom to expect much mercy. Edward was lucky: before Christmas 1016 he managed to cross the Channel and return to Normandy, probably taking with him his younger brother Alfred and his sister Godgifu. The wisdom of their hasty exit quickly became apparent, as Cnut began his reign by ruthlessly eliminating potential rivals. Battles and natural causes had already reduced the number of Edward's older half-brothers from six to one: the Danish king reduced it to zero by killing the sole survivor, Eadwig, at the same time dispatching any members of the English nobility whose loyalty seemed suspect. With grim satisfaction, the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle notes that Eadric the Grabber was among those executed.[12]

Amidst all the carnage there was one notable survivor: Edward's mother, Emma, who contributed to the stability of the new regime in England in a wholly different way. As the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle explains, Cnut 'ordered the widow of the late King Æthelred to be fetched as his wife'. This makes it sound as if Emma had little personal choice in the matter, which is probably the case; a Norman chronicler, writing not long afterwards, casually reports that she was captured in London by Cnut in the course of his conquest. Emma herself would later tell a different story: one which implied she had returned to Normandy after Æthelred's death, and was wooed back by Cnut with promises and presents. As we will see in due course, Emma's own testimony is riddled with half-truths and outright lies, so there is good reason to discount her version. Whichever way it happened, though, willingly or no, Emma became queen of England for a second time, providing a sense of continuity at Cnut's court, but in the process abandoning her children to a life of cross-Channel exile.[13]

At this point, it becomes hard to follow the story of our protagonist, Edward the Confessor, for obvious reasons: few people at the time were interested in the affairs of a boy barely into his teens whose prospects must have seemed exceedingly dim. Later, once Edward had surprisingly become king of England, some Norman writers showed a retrospective interest in his youth. At the monastery of St Wandrille, for example, it was remembered around 1050 that Edward and his brother Alfred had been warmly welcomed by Normandy's then duke, Richard II, 'generously nurtured as if they

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were his own sons, and as long as he lived they were kept in Normandy with the greatest honour'.[14]

While this may well be true, it is also fair to point out that there is no evidence that Richard did anything in particular to promote the interests of his English nephews (they apparently received no lands from him, for example). Some historians would argue that this was deliberate, supposing that the duke must have been involved in the remarriage of his sister Emma to Cnut, which actually represented a new alliance between England and Normandy. One of the conditions of such an alliance would obviously have been not to furnish the exiles with material aid, or to foster their hopes of reclaiming the English crown.[15]

Even if this was the case, however, it ceased to apply after Richard's death. In 1026 the old duke, after a long rule of thirty years, was succeeded by his namesake eldest son – but only for a short time. Barely a year later Duke Richard III was also dead – poisoned, some people whispered, by his rebellious younger brother, Robert. At this distance it is impossible to say whether there was any truth in this allegation, but Robert had certainly resented his brother's pre-eminence, and swiftly stepped into his shoes as Normandy's new ruler.[16]

Robert, it soon became clear, had not signed up to his father's policy of quiet neutrality with regard to the English exiles. According to the most important Norman chronicler for this period, William of Jumièges, Edward and Alfred 'were treated with so much honour by the duke that, bound to them by great love, he adopted them as brothers'. One historian has recently suggested that this meant the three young men had sworn oaths to each other, and become, in effect, blood brothers. That might seem to be stretching the evidence rather further than is strictly necessary: Robert, Edward and Alfred were already, of course, cousins by birth; they had all been born within a few years of each other, and had been raised together in the ducal household. It would be perfectly understandable if Robert felt compelled to champion his cousins' cause.[17]

According to William of Jumièges, this is exactly what happened. The duke, we are told, sent envoys to Cnut, demanding the restoration of Edward and Alfred. Cnut, unsurprisingly, sent them back empty-handed, at which point Robert decided to mount an invasion on his cousins' behalf. He commanded a great fleet to be constructed

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'from all the maritime regions of Normandy' and assembled on the coast.

For a long time this was regarded as a cock-and-bull story by historians; apart from anything else, it seems suspiciously similar to the events of 1066. The most frustrating thing about William of Jumièges is that, although he first wrote his chronicle in the 1050s, we know that he subsequently revised it after the Norman Conquest; what we don't know is which sections are original and which ones might have been improved with the benefit of hindsight. In this instance, however, the chronicler's story finds considerable support in the dry administrative record. Jumièges tells us that the Norman fleet was assembled at the coastal town of Fécamp, and a charter issued by Duke Robert in 1033 shows he was indeed at Fécamp that year, probably at Easter, accompanied by both Edward and Alfred, who appear among the list of witnesses. If this provides a plausible date for the expedition, two other charters issued around the same time substantiate the notion that Edward in particular was entertaining hopes of reclaiming his birthright, for in each of them he is styled 'king'. One is particularly interesting, as it is a charter issued by Edward himself in favour of the monks of Mont St Michel, another location mentioned in William of Jumièges' account.[18]

Jumièges continues his story by telling us that the ships at Fécamp were 'carefully supplied with anchors, arms and hand-picked men', but explains that these preparations were soon undone. 'Having got underway at the given signal, they were driven by a gale until, after great peril, they were at length brought to the island which is called Jersey.' There, says the chronicler, 'the fleet was long held up as the contrary winds continued to blow, so that the duke was in despair and overwhelmed by bitter frustration. At length, seeing that he could in no way cross, he sailed his ships in another direction and landed as soon as possible at Mont St Michel.'[19]

Because he was writing after Edward's succession, Jumièges was able to interpret this disaster in terms of divine providence: God clearly had plans for the future king and wished his reign to come about without the shedding of blood. But Edward himself, in the immediate wake of the disaster, is unlikely to have been so philosophical. His grant of land to Mont St Michel might plausibly be read as a pious vote of thanks for his safe deliverance from the storm, but the same storm appeared to have wrecked his chances of ever

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wearing the English crown. At this point Robert decided that the fleet assembled for England could be usefully redeployed closer to home, and proceeded to mount an attack on neighbouring Brittany.[20]

Moreover, it soon became clear that there was little hope of another expedition to England in the future. At Christmas 1034 Robert summoned all the great men of Normandy and astounded them by announcing that he was going on pilgrimage to Jerusalem (guilty conscience, said some, for the death of his brother). In the short term this meant all the duke's wealth and resources would be devoted to funding this highly costly adventure. In the longer term it meant that Normandy might well lose yet another ruler, for a round trip to the Middle East in the Middle Ages was a hazardous undertaking, fraught with all manner of perils. And so it proved when Robert set out early the following year. The duke succeeded in reaching Jerusalem, where he reportedly wept for a week at Christ's tomb and showered it with costly gifts. On the return journey, however, he grew sick, and on 2 July 1035 he died in the city of Nicaea, where he was buried by his own men.[21]

News would not have reached Normandy until the autumn, at which point Edward the Confessor must have abandoned all hope. Robert had died leaving only one son, a seven-year-old bastard called William.

But then, a few weeks later, fresh news arrived, this time from England. Cnut was dead and the succession to the English throne was undecided.

Perhaps God had plans for Edward after all.

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2

A Wave of Danes

Whatever Cnut died of, it wasn't old age. Contemporaries were agreed that he had been very young at the time of his conquest of England in 1016, which has led modern historians to place his date of birth at some point in the last decade of the first millennium. Thus when the king died in the autumn of 1035, he was probably around forty years old (a thirteenth-century Scandinavian source says he was thirty-seven). According to William of Jumièges, he had been seriously ill for some time, and this statement finds some support in a charter that Cnut gave to the monks of Sherborne Abbey in Dorset in 1035, asking for their daily prayers to help him gain the heavenly kingdom. It was at Shaftesbury, just fifteen miles from Sherborne, that the king had died on 12 November.[1]

Given his Viking ancestry, and the bloodshed that had accompanied his conquest, Cnut's anxiety to enter heaven rather than Valhalla may strike some as surprising. But in fact the Danish royal house had been converted two generations earlier, and Cnut himself had been baptized as a child (his baptismal name was Lambert). Indeed, the point of the famous story about the king and the waves, as originally told, was not to illustrate his stupidity, but rather to prove what a good Christian he had been. 'Let all the world know', says a damp Cnut, having conspicuously failed to stop the tide from rising, 'that the power of kings is empty and worthless, and there is no king worthy of the name save Him by whose will heaven, earth and sea obey eternal laws.'[2]

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Cnut had in fact been famous for such acts of ostentatious piety.

Having conquered England and dispatched his opponents in the traditional Viking manner, the king had sought to convince his remaining subjects that his rule was legitimate, and this meant, above all, demonstrating that it was approved by God. In 1027, for example, Cnut had gone on pilgrimage to Rome. He had also attempted to salve the wounds inflicted in the course of the Danish takeover – for example, by having the bones of Ælfheah, the murdered archbishop of Canterbury, moved from St Paul's Cathedral in London to a new shrine at Canterbury; by causing a church to be built on the site of the battlefield where his opponent, Edmund Ironside, had been defeated; and by visiting Edmund's tomb at Glastonbury, where he honoured the late king's memory by presenting a cloak embroidered with pictures of peacocks. The giving of such valuable objects was also typical, and helped Cnut secure a good reputation at home and abroad. 'When we saw the present you sent us,' wrote the bishop of Chartres, responding to the king's gift of some beautifully decorated books, 'we were amazed at your knowledge as well as your faith . . . you, whom we had heard to be a pagan prince, we now know to be not only a Christian, but also a most generous donor to God's servants.'[3]

There was nothing incongruous, therefore, when Cnut was eventually laid to rest in Winchester, in the cathedral known as the Old Minster, alongside the bones of St Swithin and several earlier kings of England and Wessex. His reign – almost twenty years long, as the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle noted at the time – had been a success, largely because he had striven to observe and maintain English traditions. Even the few novelties that were once ascribed to Cnut are now reckoned not to have been novel at all. Once, for example, he was thought to have introduced a new breed of warriors from Scandinavia, his 'housecarls', to serve as a separate standing army. But closer examination suggests that the housecarls were no different from the household warriors maintained by his English predecessors. Cnut *did* have a standing army of sorts, since he maintained a permanent fleet of ships with paid Danish crews. But here he was simply following the example of Æthelred the Unready, who had maintained just such a fleet from 1012, and had introduced a new national tax to pay for it. The only difference was that Æthelred's fleet had been bigger.

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Nevertheless, for all Cnut's determination to portray himself as a

traditional Old English king, his reign had altered English society dramatically. Or rather, that society had been altered in the tumultuous period up to and including his conquest.

English society in the eleventh century was highly stratified. We know that there were approximately two million people living in England at the end of the century, and that the population was rising all the time, so there must have been rather fewer than that number at the century's start.[5] At a fundamental level, these people were divided into two categories: the free and the unfree.

Although many books on the Anglo-Saxons do not say much about it, more than ten per cent of England's population were slaves.[6] Slavery was a widespread institution in early medieval Europe, and the sale and export of slaves was one of the main motors of the economy. Since the ninth century the trade's most outstanding exponents had been the Vikings, whose warfare was predicated for the most part on seizing young men and women as merchandise, to be sold either at home in Scandinavia or – very commonly – to Arab merchants in the Middle East. England was one of their principal hunting grounds, so individuals abducted from the coasts of Devon, Wales or Northumbria might eventually find themselves labouring under a desert sun to construct a caliph's palace, or members of a sultan's harem.[7]

Slaves were similarly used in England for hard labour and sexual gratification, to judge from contemporary comments. Male slaves were generally used as agricultural workers, and something of the nature of their condition is captured in a celebrated passage written by Ælfric, a late tenth-century abbot of Eynsham, which imagines the speech of an unfree ploughman:

> I go out at daybreak, goading the oxen to the field, and I join them to the plough; there is not a winter so harsh that I dare lurk at home for fear of my master. But after yoking the oxen and securing the ploughshare and coulter to the plough, throughout the whole day I must plough a full acre or more . . . I must fill the stall of the oxen with hay and supply them with water and carry their dung outside. Oh! Oh! The work is hard. Yes, the work is hard, because I am not free.[8]

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