

***Gesta Willelmi ducis Normannorum et regis Anglorum***

**By William of Poitiers**

*An Extract Commentary*

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Norman Myth and Identity (HPHI5009)

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## Source Text Extract

### William of Poitiers *Gesta Willelmi ducis Normannorum et regis Anglorum*

About the same time, Edward, king of the English, who had already appointed William as his heir, and who held him in the same affection as a brother or son, gave more serious evidence of his intentions than before. He decided to anticipate the implacable decree of death, whose approaching hour this man, who aspired to heaven by the saintliness of his life, now felt. In order to confirm his promise by an oath, Edward sent to William Harold, the most prominent of his subjects in wealth, honour and power, and whose brother and nephew had already been given as hostages to ensure this succession. This was a measure of the utmost wisdom because its authenticity and authority would restrain the dissensions among the whole English nation, if - as might be expected from the vagaries and perfidy of their behaviour - they had tried to rebel against it.

Harold, as he was on his voyage to carry out this mission, and had already escaped the dangers of the crossing, landed in Ponthieu, where he fell into the hands of count Guy. He and his attendants were captured and thrown into prison, a misadventure which a man of his standing would willingly have exchanged for shipwreck. For the lure of gain has led certain nations in Gaul into an accursed practice, barbarous and totally foreign to Christian justice. They set ambushes for rich or powerful men, throw them into prison, and submit them to outrages and tortures. Overcome with misfortunes, and almost on the point of death, they are only released on the payment of a huge [sum of money].

Duke William, informed of the fate of the man who had been sent to him, hastily dispatched an embassy and snatched him from prison by prayers and threats, and went to meet him with due honour. Guy behaved well: without being persuaded to do so by the lure of gain or the constraint of force, he led him in person to the castle of Eu and presented to the duke a man whom he could freely have tortured, killed or sold. As a suitable reward, William gave him vast and rich lands and added large sums of money as well. As for Harold, William brought him into Rouen, the capital of his principality, with all honour; here his varied hospitality and attention restored and made joyful the men who had suffered such hardship on the way. William doubtless congratulated himself on having a guest of such distinction, an ambassador from his relation and dear friend: he hoped that he would be a faithful mediator between himself and the English, for whom he was second only to the king.

At a gathering at Bonneville, Harold took an oath of faithfulness to him according to the sacred rite of the Christians. And, as highly respected men of the utmost sincerity have related, who were witnesses to the event, in the last item in the oath that was drawn up, he pronounced, clearly and of his own free will, these words: that he would be the agent of duke William at the court of king Edward for as long as the king lived; that he would try with all his authority and power, to ensure for him the possession of the kingdom of England on Edward's death: and that meanwhile, he would hand over the castle of Dover, fortified under his direction and his own expense, to a garrison of the duke's knights; that he would deliver, at the same time, in various places in the kingdom, other castles to be fortified in the duke's orders; and that he would also provide abundantly for the provisioning of the garrisons. The duke, having received Harold as

his vassal, and before he had taken this oath, conferred on him, at his request, all the lands he held, with full powers. For it was feared that Edward, who was already ill, would not live much longer. After this, because he knew that Harold was bold and eager for new glory, he provided him and his company with weapons, armour and the finest horses, and took them with him to fight in Brittany. He treated him as a guest and ambassador, but now made him almost one of his companions, in order to strengthen the ties between them by doing him honour. For Brittany had treacherously begun an armed rebellion against Normandy.

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When he returned to his quarters, the duke, having detained his very dear guest Harold for some time, sent him home loaded with presents, worthy of the rank of the two of them, both of him on whose behalf he had been sent and of him whose honour he had thus increased. In addition, one of the two hostages, his nephew returned with him, freed as a mark of respect to his person

## Commentary Text

The *Gesta Willelmi ducis Normannorum et regis Anglorum* is a treasure amongst the trove of Norman annals, histories and prose that were written contemporaneous to the events they cover. Essayist and Doctoral Researcher Lauri Leinonen refers to 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> century Normandy as a ‘manuscript culture’<sup>1</sup>, and the quantity and tone of these literary relics provide a firsthand view into how the Normans aggrandized themselves, created their own mythos, justified their conquests and catalogued their times and culture through what would today might be categorized as State (and/or Church) Propaganda. Portier’s *Deeds* attempts to do all of these. This commentary will examine an abstract from the Solider turned Chaplain’s panegyric framing of William’s legal claim to England’s throne and his great mercy, honour and forbearance towards Harold, his chief enemy at the Battle of Hastings. Additionally, the *Gesta* itself is worthy of extensive scholarly work, was never completed due to potential royal intrigue, and has no linear transmission or manuscript history.<sup>2</sup> This and its author, William of Portier will also be briefly explored.

The abstract opens with its author carefully laying the just and legal groundwork for William, the Duke of Normandy’s claim to the English throne. The writer starts with a declarative statement of fact, that Edward, at some prior time (the setting of the abstract is potentially two years or more before the paramount Battle of Hastings in 1066 that ushered in the Norman Conquest of England) had already appointed William as his heir. This provides

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<sup>1</sup> Lauri Leinonen, ‘The Gesta Guillelmi of William of Poitiers: The Dynamics of a Failed Publication’

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<<https://helda.helsinki.fi/server/api/core/bitstreams/b42edd3f-cd84-4cbe-8f91-98b4d871f4cb/content>> [accessed 12<sup>th</sup> of April, 2026], p. 2

<sup>2</sup> Lauri Leinonen, ‘The Gesta Guillelmi of William of Poitiers: The Dynamics of a Failed Publication’

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illumination that the Normans were not ‘far off’ Norseman, at least not by the middle of the 11<sup>th</sup> century. They already had a complex relationship with the British Isles including shared royal bloodlines. According to the Bayeux Museum’s website, which is an academic reference guide to the Bayeux Tapestry, a medieval embroidery that chronicles the rise of William, the death of Edward and the Battle of Hastings, Edward was the son of Anglo-Saxon King Ethelred II and Emma of Normandy, who was William’s great-aunt. This made William and Edward cousins, once removed. Moreover, the English sovereign spent more than three decades of this life in Normandy. The website states:

He remained very attached to Normandy, where he had spent 30 years in exile, when he was banished by the Danish conquerors. In 1064, in England and still childless, Edward naturally turned to William, his first cousin once removed, to succeed him on the throne.<sup>3</sup>

The two kingdoms were already connected to the point of intertwine. Beyond an ancestral based claim to the throne, Portier asserts that Edward, childless and facing death, ‘held him (William) in the same affection as a brother or son, gave more serious evidence of his intentions than before.’<sup>4</sup> The writer then proceeds to praise Edward’s faithful life, giving Christian overtones to the work, and teaches that, transcending a private promise, Edward would send his brother-in-law, Harold Godwin to confirm the promise via oath. Poitier, writing the *Gesta* after Hastings causes the leader to look back to the build-up ere the war, and in so doing bolsters William’s enemy, describing Harold as ‘the most prominent of his subjects in wealth, honour and power.’<sup>5</sup> Although flowery language is not used, the writing is akin to praise poetry in that it elevates the villain to magnify the greatness of the hero. By rendering Harold strong, how much moreso William who later vanquishes him.

Poitier would have his readership next believe that Edward had already given hostages from the house of Godwin to William as a measure to mitigate risk of dissention and false claimants to the throne. He summarizes the multifaceted directive of hostage keeping and an oath by Harold confirming the succession agreement as ‘a measure of the utmost wisdom because its authenticity and authority would restrain the dissensions among the whole English nation, if - as might be expected from the vagaries and perfidy of their behaviour - they had tried to rebel against it.’<sup>6</sup>

The writer has thus far withheld William’s introduction. Following the bolstering of Edward and Harold, he pauses to provide an account of Harold’s capture while enroute to pledge the oath. Harold is taken captive and brought to Count Guy of Ponthieu. The account does not directly state that a shipwreck occurred, but rather that piracy and ambush is the cause, the

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<sup>3</sup> Bayeux Museum, *The Story of the Tapestry* (2026)

<<https://www.bayeuxmuseum.com/en/the-bayeux-tapestry/discover-the-bayeux-tapestry/the-characters/>> [accessed 12<sup>th</sup> of April, 2026]

<sup>4</sup> William of Poitiers, *The Gesta Guillelmi of William of Poitiers* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), p. 4

<sup>5</sup> William of Poitiers, *The Gesta Guillelmi of William of Poitiers* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), p. 4

<sup>6</sup> William of Poitiers, *The Gesta Guillelmi of William of Poitiers* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), p. 4

wealthy ambushed and ransomed for riches. He writes, 'For the lure of gain has led certain nations in Gaul into an accursed practice, barbarous and totally foreign to Christian justice.'<sup>7</sup> Through the use of inversion, the Normans are portrayed as Christian and civilized while the unnamed Gaulish nations (most probably the Celtic Bretons) are barbarous pagans. Harold is facing misery, torture and a fate worse than death. Enter William, Duke of Normandy:

Duke William, informed of the fate of the man who had been sent to him, hastily dispatched an embassy and snatched him from prison by prayers and threats, and went to meet him with due honour.<sup>8</sup>

The Norman Duke acts swiftly, his retinue extricating Harold from his bonds through prayer (spiritual authority) and threats (military or political authority). The short abstract here makes a stylistic change from a legal treatise with an argument to a swash-buckling story, allowing Poitier to describe William's motives, thoughts and attributes. The Norman Duke, all-powerful, humbles himself by personally going to meet Harold with due honour. Count Guy, clearly a vassal of a more powerful Lord, yields up Harold and is rewarded by riches and lands from William. There are no hints of a violent ruler, or a man given to rage or overreach. Instead, William is generous, honourable and noble. Although not explicit, the *Gesta* hints at a complex hierarchy and rules of engagement amongst Norman rulers. Guy had some authority to take prisoners and the spoils of ambush but acquiesces without conflict.

The bestowments upon Harold, whom William treats as friend or brother are extensive. Harold is conducted to Rouen, the capital, and restored with every material need. William's desire is that, once King of England, Harold will serve as a mediator between he and the English, being only outranked by William himself. The Norman Duke has saved the Saxon lord from death and torture, treated him honour and humility, and did all to make him his dear friend. Based upon the account, William is the rightful ruler and Harold (although not covered in the abstract) the eventual usurper.

But, far exceeding political ceremony, the two future belligerents take up arms *together* in campaigns against the Bretons, and are featured working together to defeat Duke Conan on the Bayeux Tapestry.<sup>9</sup> William bestows Harold and the English with horses, armour and munitions and in every way makes the Saxons his trusted allies. Following this, having opened with a legal argument, then transitioned to actions, deeds, and characteristics, Poitier resumes the legal argument:

At a gathering at Bonneville, Harold took an oath of faithfulness to him according to the sacred rite of the Christians. And, as highly respected men of the utmost sincerity have related, who were witnesses to the event, in the last item in the oath that was drawn up, he pronounced, clearly and of his own free will, these words: that he would be the agent of duke William at the court of king Edward for as long as the king lived; that he would try with all his authority and power, to ensure for him the possession of the kingdom of England on Edward's death.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid, p. 4

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, p. 4

<sup>9</sup> Bayeux Museum, *The Story of the Tapestry* (2026)

<<https://www.bayeuxmuseum.com/en/the-bayeux-tapestry/discover-the-bayeux-tapestry/the-characters/>> [accessed 12<sup>th</sup> of April, 2026]

<sup>10</sup> William of Poitiers, *The Gesta Guillelmi of William of Poitiers* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), p. 4

According to the *Gesta*, King Edward made a promise, which was secured by detaining potential dissidents, strengthened by dispatching his most powerful ally and brother-in-law to confirm the promise, which Harold did before all, publicly and without disputation at Bonneville. If factual then Harold is a usurper and William a liberator in more of a civil war amongst heavily connected kingdoms instead of a conquest from invaders from the north. Minus any additional scholarship, the story could be viewed as total propaganda whereby Harold hazarded his life to rescue his kinsmen, who were taken prisoner by the Normans, and William, taking advantage of Guy's piracy, leveraged Harold's capture in exchange for his sword against the Bretons and feigned fealty to the Duke. The truth, or degree of truth is hard to discern.

The *Gesta* rests on shaky ground from a textual criticism perspective and could have been altered, edited or suffered significant changes. Although the work is referred to by a contemporary, Orderic Vitalis, in manuscripts written in his own hand, the earliest copy of the Poitiers's work dates only back to 1619, causing a six-hundred-year gap between the event and the documentary evidence. Although most scholars do think the copy to be faithful, there is also limited information about its author. Leinonen writes, 'In contrast to what might be expected of a distinguished man of letters operating in close proximity to the ducal administration, William of Poitiers is almost non-existent in the charter evidence'<sup>11</sup>. Poitiers is credited with no other works and the *Gesta* was incomplete. In balance however, Leinonen, having triangulated *Gesta* with several other contemporary works, finds it to be reliable, meaning that the current version is likely close to the original. He summarizes 'As a martial history written by an ecclesiastic, the GG is exceptional,'<sup>12</sup> and later concludes. 'Most importantly, the GG provides the fullest argument for the legitimacy of King William to the crown of England'<sup>13</sup>. This treasure of Norman lore and mythos is of vital importance for that very reason and frames new concepts, if true, to a history changing event that may have been a lawful military operation to uproot a Pretender and no conquest at all.

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<sup>11</sup> Lauri Leinonen, 'The Gesta Guillelmi of William of Poitiers: The Dynamics of a Failed Publication'

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<sup>12</sup> Lauri Leinonen, 'The Gesta Guillelmi of William of Poitiers: The Dynamics of a Failed Publication'

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<sup>13</sup> Lauri Leinonen, 'The Gesta Guillelmi of William of Poitiers: The Dynamics of a Failed Publication'

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