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What role does Harold play in post-conquest historical narrative?

‘Subrogatur autem regio fauore in eius ducatu filius eius maior natu et
sapientia Haroldus, unde in consolationem
respirat uniuersus Anglorum exercitus.’

His son Harold, eldest in birth as in wisdom, was,
by the king’s favour, appointed to the earldom in his place;
and at this time the whole English host breathed again and was consoled for its loss’.¹

There is with no doubt that Harold was a key figure in the ‘story’ of the whole of the year 1066, but his role post-conquest differs depending whether the account was written by an Anglo-Saxon or Norman chronicler and at what distance it is from the events both in time and locality. This essay aims to examine the different roles played by Harold in surviving histories, and discuss the potential reasons for this variation.

Does Harold have a role to play beyond October 1066 is the vexed question and leaves one to wonder if he had by then served his purpose. Described in the quote above it seems to infer he was just a vassal useful to King Edward to keep the peace, keeping the continuity of order established by his father Godwin.² Could he be just a pawn in a complex game of thrones? If the victor always writes the history does Harold leave a legacy that could endure, maybe it is there but hidden in plain sight. Even though Harold’s life and death is portrayed in events of the middle of the eleventh-century and is very much in the hands of the chroniclers and history writers it can also be found in unexpected places.³

Considering the evidence starting with the *Vita Haroldi* from the scriptorium at Waltham Abbey appears to give a unique survival story and apart from one other reference found in the Ralph of

¹ *The Life of King Edward the Confessor*, trans. and ed. by F. Barlow (London: Thomas Nelson and Sons Ltd, 1962), p. 30. Referring to the loss of Godwin Harold’s father.

² Godwin had a very complex co-dependant relationship with Edward their relationship is explored by Frank Barlow, *The Godwins* (London: Pearson Educational Limited, 2002).

³ Two instances where Harold has a larger than expected presence is firstly in the Bayeux Tapestry, which at first sight is to tell the story and glorify William’s successes and prowess, a second example is his major role in the first part of the *Vita E*.

Coggeshall's *Chronicon Anglicanum* the survival theory is dismissed by modern historians as fantasy.⁴ At the time his survival may have been left to speculation to deter a cult developing around his tomb if the body had been identified and given to his mother for burial. At Waltham Harold was the patron of the Abbey and it may have been in their interest to keep the story alive for reasons discussed later, Ralph of Coggeshall was an English Chronicler but was writing in the early thirteen-century and does not give any reference to his sources.

Putting aside for a moment Harold's death we can find a credible although bias view of Harold's character; and a good place to start which puts him in the sphere of the kings influence is '*The life of King Edward the Confessor*' (*Vita E*). Commissioned by Edith, Edward's wife and Harold's sister, documents the Godwin family line before extolling her husband saintly virtues.⁵ It is within this relationship between the Godwins and Edward as well as the preceding occupants of the throne of England, that of Cnut, Harold Harefoot and Hardecanute where we discover more about Harold. It is also important to understand the relationship William Duke of Normandy had with Edward the Confessor and how this relationship between them and Harold affected their actions and the outcome. Edward appears to be both the cause and solution to the complex relationships and to the events which culminate on the battlefield in 1066 and the writing of history thereafter.

Using primary texts in translation from both Harold and William's camps and looking at documents that appear to sit on the fence it is possible to begin to uncover Harold's legacy. A second son, or third son depending upon which text consulted,⁶ following Godwin's death in 1053 Harold inherited his father mantle as the most wealthy and influential earl in England in the eleventh-century.⁷ But he also inherited the results of the deeds and misdeeds of not only his father but also his siblings which could be said to contribute to his downfall. Godwin became

⁴ *Vita Haroldi*, trans. and ed. W. de Gray Birch (London: Elliot Stock, 1885); <<https://archive.org/details/ChroniconAnglicanum/page/n41/mode/2up?q=Harold>> [accessed 27 December 2020] p. 1.

⁵ *Vita E*; BL MS. Harley 526 ff 38r -57v.

⁶ *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicles*, trans. and ed. by M. Swanton (London: Phoenix Press, 2002) p. *The Chronicles of Henry of Huntingdon*, trans. and ed., by T. Forester (London: Henry G Bohn, 1853), p. 205; *Vita E*, p. 30.

⁷ I. W. Walker, *Harold, The last Anglo-Saxon King* (Gloucestershire: The History Press, 2010), pp. 61-83.

important to Cnut following his successful invasion of England in 1016, Godwin gave his support to Cnut and he in his turn gave his sister in marriage to Godwin.⁸ After Cnut's death in 1035 Godwin was implicated in the death of Alfred, Edward's brother, who upon their return to England from exile in Normandy made a unsuccessful bid to succeed Cnut.⁹ Edward return to Normandy and his half brothers, Harold Harefoot and Hardecanute were on the throne of England for seven years on the authority of Queen Emma their mother. The Godwins at this time aligned with Emma, had disputes within the family circle and with other challengers involving the crown and country and went into exile for short periods. Harold went to Ireland and others to the continent, but they continued to have great influence through their earldoms. All of the family disputes had a lasting effect on Harold, he witnessed and was part of the difficult and tumultuous events of his father's affairs and changes of allegiance. Later Harold took a more pragmatic line in giving full fealty to the king after his father died in 1053 and did not allow family issues to distract his allegiance to the crown. When Edward came to the throne in 1042 Godwin professed his loyalty and went on to become his chief adviser, and Godwin's daughter Edith married the king on 23 January 1043. Godwin and Edward's relationship was an uneasy one; but in keeping with the eleventh-century laws the crown depended on the loyalty of the aristocracy, Earl Godwin had the power and connections to raise taxes and armies for the king and Edward as king reigned by the grace of God to protect and lead his people.¹⁰

Looking in more depth into Harold's life the '*Vita E*' gives us, although biased view, a description of his attributes which are also backed up in other texts. Written at the request of Edith the work is attributed to a monk of St Bertin's at St Omer.¹¹ Considered to have been started before 1066 and certainly completed before Queen Edith's death in 1075.¹² The text is written to eulogise Edward but also those who faithfully served him and to do honour to the patron, Edith. The only

⁸ Godwin married Cnut's sister in law. Chronicle reports are incorrect.

⁹ Frank Barlow, *Edward the Confessor* (London: Methuen, 1970), p. 43.

¹⁰ Edward was under the Anglo-Saxon Law which gave him the right to pass laws, he had power over the church but he needed the earls, the most powerful lords to work with him to run the country and supply men to fight wars. the relationship is explored by F Stenton, *Anglo-Saxon England* (Oxford:Oxford University Press, 1971)

¹¹ *Vita E*, p. 2.

¹² A. Gransden, *Historical Writing in England c.550-c.1307* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul,1974), p. 60.

known surviving text in the British Library lacks the beginning of chapter ii but the final section contains a poem that begins with singing the praises of some of Edith's siblings.

'Four ample streams to stir the earth's recess and
And nourish the estate of men and beasts.'¹³

The poem continues to describe very eloquently the story of the power and fracturing of the house of Godwin. Tostig, and Swein the eldest of Godwin's sons not mentioned here, both cause great disruptions and problems, Harold, Gyrth and Leofwine we see at the Battle of Hastings. Harold, upon receiving the earldom of Wessex from the king after his father's death is described in the '*Vita E*' '...eldest in birth as in wisdom...'. He is a '...second Judas Maccabeus: a true friend of his race and country, he wielded his father's powers even more actively... in patience and mercy and with kindness... but with a face of a lion.'¹⁴ The description of her brothers glosses over the rivalry and waywardness that is documented in other texts and it becomes clear that Edith favoured Tostig, he causes great trouble in the 'North' which Harold has eventually to deal with.¹⁵ Before the Battle of Stamford Bridge and Tostig's betrayal and death Harold was the peacemaker and rescuer for his brother.

The English contemporary texts surviving from various centres of learning and attributed to named individuals including, Henry of Huntingdon, Orderic Vitalus, Eadmer and William of Malmesbury as well as the collection known as the Anglo-Saxon chronicles (ASC) all have selective and contrasting views to the Norman chronicles, contemporary and later, of William of Poitiers, William of Jamièges and the very early poem '*The Carmen de Hastingae Proelio*' of Guy Bishop of Amiens. Some appear to copy verbatim earlier works and others miss out details that might embarrass a patron.

The *Chronicon ex chronicis* is possibly written closest to the events of 1066, attributed to an English monk John of Worcester, (c.1075-1140) the early part appears to have been either penned or

¹³ *Vita E*, p. 15, see also p. 4, n. 2. thought to be her brothers Harold, Tostig, Gyrth and Leofwine.

¹⁴ *Vita E*, p. 30. it is clear here that Edith, in Edward's words, is dismissing the older brothers as unworthy of family recognition.

¹⁵ W. E. Kapelle, *The Norman Conquest of the North* (Chapel Hill: the University of North Carolina Press, 1979); *Vita E*, p. 31. Tostig succeeds Siward as earl of Northumbria.

assisted by Florence another monk at the priory¹⁶. Florence died in 1118 possibly contributed the contemporary account of the period leading up to and including 1066. John is described by Orderic Vitalis in his Chronicle as ‘...a native of England, ...a man of venerable character and great learning, in the additions which he has made to the chronicles of Marianus Scotus has gathered faithful accounts of King William...’¹⁷ John’s description of Harold in the *Chronicon ex chronicis* shows great respect addressing him as earl or King. John writes of Harold’s considerable value to his father as the loyal son supporting and also doing the bidding of King Edward in battle even against his brothers. He was ‘a brave earl, zealously obeying the king’s orders’, ... ‘...intrepid and daring warrior’. In 1066 following the death and burial of Edward, John writes ‘...Harold, the vice-king, son of earl Godwin, whom the king before his death had chosen him as successor, was elected king by all the leading men of England. ...crowned with great ceremony by Aldred, archbishop of York.’¹⁸ When reporting Harold’s death John writes that he ‘...made a stout resistance from the third hour of the day until nightfall and defended himself with such courage and obstinacy, ...he, alas fell at twilight.’ There is no mention of where he was taken to be buried.¹⁹ An important and influencing factor in the account of John is that he was commissioned by his Bishop Wulfstan who plays a significant part in Harold’s life and would have overseen the work.²⁰ John also carefully documents the outcome of the events on Harold’s family and tells us that Edgar the Atheling after a failed attempt to claim the throne was escorted to Scotland with his family. Duke William is portrayed as ‘tyrannous’ but is referred to with respect as king.

A contemporary of John of Worcester but with mixed Norman-English parentage is William of Malmesbury (c.1095-1143) visiting and exchanging materials with John he composed *Gesta*

¹⁶ Gransden, p. 144. References the opinion that Florence was a compiler and not the scribe. *The Chronicles of John of Worcester, Chronicon ex chronicis* <http://www.bsswebsite.me.uk/History/JohnofWorcester/Chronicle_John.html> [accessed 29 December 2020]

¹⁷ Orderic Vitalis, *Historia Ecclesiastica Book III*, trans. and ed. by Marjorie Chibnall (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969), p. 186, n. 2 & p. 187. Orderic visited John at Worcester to consult him; Gransden, p. 144.

¹⁸ Aldred or Ealdred, died 11 September 1069, an archbishop, diplomat and military leader loyal advisor to Edward and Harold. Seen in the Bayeux Tapestry.

¹⁹ *Chronicon ex chronicis* see entry for 1066.

²⁰ Wulfstan c.1008-20 January 1096. Bishop of Worcester from 1062.

regum Anglorum which is dedicated to Robert, 1st Earl of Gloucester.²¹ William was prolific in his output of work, and his national history is considered only second to Aethelweard.²² 'He absorbed both Anglo-Saxon and the Anglo-Norman traditions...' and used comparisons with Roman figures, for instance William the Conqueror was akin to Julius Caesar. William's account of Harold differs considerably from that of John. He appears to have made his own judgement of the Godwins. His tone was critical of Harold and his father whom he describes as 'paying little reverence to the king [Edward]' and '...Harold too, of the West Saxons, the son of Godwin; who by his abilities destroyed two brothers, kings of the Welsh...' he calls them 'insolent' for mocking the king. Their attitude reported by William was reported through the filter of Edward's mother Emma, who was very influential at this time [1052], and her disregard for Edward; the Godwins were related by marriage to Emma.²³ William does record Edward realising the extent of the power held by Godwin and his sons he made peace with them and they in turn gave fealty by oath to the king. William is critical of the marriage Edward made with Edith, Godwin's daughter. We do also learn a lot about Harold's brothers and how he was sent by the king to quell uprisings on the North.²⁴ Writing at some distance from the events William is influenced more by continental narratives. He never refers to Harold as king or even earl but does acknowledge that although his claim to the throne was false he writes that 'Harold would have governed the kingdom with prudence and with courage...' ²⁵ 'only defeated by death.' William is considered as an English historian but his loyalties lay closer to home with that of the credibility of Malmesbury Abbey, his own mixed parentage left him conflicted but his views could have been swayed by the Norman patron of the abbey. We also begin to see the influence of the Norman writers here with the notion of the oath of allegiance Harold is purported to have given to William duke of Normandy.

A picture is emerging of Harold, from the *Vita E* and John of Worcester's *Chronicon ex chronicis*, as a diligent and faithful son and earl, doing his father's, then the king's work to defend the

²¹ Robert FitzRoy, 1st Earl of Gloucester, c.1090-1147 grandson of William the Conqueror.

²² Gransden, p. 167.

²³ Emma's second marriage was to Cnut, Godwin was married to Cnut's sister-in-law.

²⁴ see Kapelle for more details.

²⁵ William of Malmesbury's *Chronicle of the Kings of England*, A.D. 1065-66, <<http://www.gutenberg.org>> [accessed 26 December 2020]

borders and repel invaders who are making claims on the throne of England or is another agenda emerging? He has become indispensable to the king who himself is becoming increasingly devout and shrinking from the secular world. But the reporting of Harold's character is still dependant on the sources patron and their allegiance, English or Norman. The documenting of the final years of Edward's reign and then Harold's reign along with his downfall were very selective. Questions open up about Harold's integrity and intentions from William of Malmesbury and Orderic Vitalis. Further texts could be explored but they are polarised and tend to take sides repeating the bias of their position. For example, Eadmer (1060-1120) in his *Historia Novorum in Anglia* was an Englishman by birth but resented the Norman invasion and that view is illustrated in his work.²⁶

There are two incidents which have a bearing on how Harold would be remembered and recorded but they are surrounded by flimsy evidence and confusion. They concern the matter of succession; the alleged visit of Duke William in 1052 to Edward, and Harold's oath to William possibly in 1064. The visit is only briefly documented in ASC in the Worcester Manuscript D, and Wace's *Roman de Rou* and does not mention the reason but forms the basis of the giving of the promise.²⁷ The visit is now generally disregarded in most quarters.²⁸ 1051 was a time when the Godwins were at their least powerful and in exile and disgrace and Edward was concerned about the succession. In 1051-2 William was very busy in Normandy defending his dukedom. It is considered that the promise may have been conveyed by Robert of Jumièges when he was sent to Rome to receive his pallium as archbishop of Canterbury in 1051.²⁹

Texts written by William of Malmesbury whom I have already discussed, Orderic Vitalis and Henry of Huntingdon document the Norman view of events and along with the Bayeux Tapestry, BT, are

²⁶ Gransden, p. 136.

²⁷A visit is found in the ASC D, p. 176. referring to an earl William visiting Edward; *The History of the Norman People*, Wace's *Roman de Rou*, trans., by G. S. Burgess, and eds., G. S. Burgess, and E. van Houts (Woodbridge: the Boydell Press, 2004), p. 151.

²⁸ The evidence or lack of it is discussed by Barlow, *The Godwins*; Walker, p. xxiii; Douglas, p. 169. Barlow, *Edward the Confessor*, explores the evidence for succession of Duke William at a time when the Godwins were out of favour.

²⁹ David C. Douglas, *William the Conqueror* (London: Yale University Press, 1999), p. 169. Robert was the brother of William of Jumièges.

the only evidence for an oath made by Harold.³⁰ Closer study of the oath in the BT appears to show a different motive which will be explored later.

Both William and Harold's credibility revolves around these two incidents and influences what history recalls. William of Malmesbury reported Harold's appearance in Normandy but sits on the fence about the purpose of the trip and questions whose report is to be believed. He does record the events in great detail but avoids a precise date. He weighed up the evidence and came to the conclusion Harold kingship was the best outcome for England but does judge him harshly. He continues to refer to Harold as earl after he had gained the crown and charges him with parricide. '...Harold returned from the battle with the Norwegians; happy, in his own estimation, at having conquered; but not so in mine, as he had secured the victory by parricide.'³¹ and in preparing for the battle with William he continues his cutting remarks of Harold '...though accompanied by very few forces. No doubt the fates urged him on, as he neither summoned his troops, nor, had he been willing to do so, would he have found many ready to obey his call; so hostile were all to him, as I have before observed, from his having appropriated the northern spoils entirely to himself.'³²

Orderic Vitalis does not report the oath until his entry for 1066 after maligning Harold with accusations of 'perjury, cruelty, and other iniquities...'.³³ Born in about c.1075 in Atcham Shropshire, Orderic was sent by his Norman Father at the age of ten to be an oblate at Saint-Evroul, where he died in c.1142. It is thought that his English mother had died in child-birth, his patron was the Earl of Shrewsbury,³⁴ He writes of a visit to Worcester whilst John was writing his *Historia Ecclesiastica* but clearly had a very different understanding of Harold.³⁵ He was influenced by the *Gesta normannorum ducum*, the work of William of Jamièges (c1000- d after 1070) which he was instructed to revise and continue. Other sources for his work that he would have available

³⁰ The alleged oath of 1064 William of Malmesbury documents in 1066 just before the Battle of Hastings and only concerns the marriage of Harold to Duke William's daughter. She had died before gaining marriageable age and so Harold argues the oath was invalid.WM, p. 272. OV, p. 137, also refers to a marriage contract.

³¹ WM, p. 273.

³² WM, p. 275.

³³ OV, p. 135.

³⁴ Roger de Montgomery died in 1094, a principle councillor of William the Conqueror, founded Shrewsbury Abbey in 1083, he was at the Battle of Hastings. Wace, p.184.

³⁵ OV, pp. 171-175.

include *Gesta Guillelmi* written by William of Poitiers (c1020-1090) who was chaplain to Duke William and whose work is summed up by Gransden as 'biased, unreliable account of events and unrealistic portraits of the two principle protagonists'. Gransden continues her assessment of Poitiers who '...explicitly states that he has omitted circumstantial details in order to return to the praises of King William'.³⁶ Orderic does appear to vacillate between destroying the reputation of Harold and then having sympathy for the English people describes the '..exhaustion of the English and Welsh ... on whom the Norman conquest had brought such grievous burdens upon the English, ...'.³⁷ but then their saviour of course was William who could bring order, he was 'high minded' and he had God on his side.³⁸ But there is the issue of the 'Harrying of the North' by William which Orderic puts down to evil counsellors and treachery. William may have conquered the south of England but he never quite managed to subdue the North.³⁹ The fate of Harold's family is also confused with no details and no dates. As Orderic had spent time with John of Worcester and was a professed anglophile and although he had very good sources at his disposal he appears muddled and unsure of his story line but one attitude does come across is his vehement dislike of Harold and sanguine support of William. The difficulty with Orderic is that no dates are offered and he is using mainly secondhand information and reporting inaccurate relationships. He does however give William a deathbed speech of confession.

'I did not attain that high honour [King of England] by hereditary right
but wrested it from the perjured King Harold in a desperate battle...' ⁴⁰

Orderic offers no evidence for the visit claimed by William to Edward in 1052 where he suggests the succession was agreed.

An oath can be found in the *Historia Anglorum* (HA) of Henry of Huntingdon (c.1088-1157) a scholar-cleric, of mixed parentage, English mother, Norman father. Composed at the request of Alexander bishop of Lincoln he used his work for a moral purpose. In 1063 Harold, upon his oath of allegiance to assist William to accede to English throne was offered a marriage to William's

³⁶ Gransden, p. 102.

³⁷ OV, p. 217.

³⁸ OV, p. 181.

³⁹ for more details see Kapelle.

⁴⁰ Peter Rex, *Harold II the Doomed Saxon King* (Stroud: Tempus Publishing, 2005), p. 155.

daughter.⁴¹ Henry's dialogue was similar to that of Orderic's with no evidence of visit to England by William.

Further enquires into the oath we find William of Poitiers putting a statement in the mouth of a monk sent as a messenger to William from Harold just before the Battle at Hastings starts,

... 'He (Harold) recalls, indeed, that King Edward formerly decreed that you should be heir to the English kingdom, and that he himself gave you surety in Normandy for this succession. He knows, however, that the kingdom is his by right, by gift of the same lord king, made to him on his deathbed. For ever since the time when St Augustine came to these parts, the common custom of this people has been that the gift anyone made at the point of death shall be held as valid.'

Both William and Harold are convinced of their right to the crown. Historians have made detailed studies of the laws of succession in both Anglo-Saxon England and Normandy and they do differ and support the view expressed.⁴²

Poitiers who was close to William may well have heard first hand reports of the battle and have read the documented events in the poem by Guy, Bishop of Amiens, *The Carmen de Hastingae* written in Normandy for William's wife Matilda straight after the events to glorify the victory.⁴³ An oath is depicted in the BT but like a number of ambiguous scenes its interpretation is left to the viewer. Broadly considered to be based on Poitiers reports but in it we can see some duplicity. The identity of the patron of the BT has a wide consensus of opinion in favour of Bishop Odo, who was half brother of William and was appointed archbishop to Canterbury where the BT is thought to have been made, and to Bayeux where it was destined.⁴⁴ A new theory suggested by Keats-

⁴¹ HA, p. 206.

⁴² S. Baxter, 'Edward the Confessor and the Succession Question' *Edward the Confessor, The Man and the Legend*, ed. by Richard Mortimer (Stroud: Boydell & Brewer, 2009); F. Barlow, *Edward the Confessor* (London: Methuen, 1970)

⁴³ *The Carmen de Hastingae of Guy Bishop of Amiens*, trans. and ed. by F. Barlow (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1999)

⁴⁴ Theories discussed in, David J. Bernstein, *The Mystery of the Bayeux Tapestry* (London: Guild Publishing, 1986); T. Rowley, *An Archaeological Study of the Bayeux Tapestry* (South Yorkshire: Pen & Sword Books Ltd, 2016); W. Grape, *The Bayeux Tapestry* (London: Prestel, 1994)

Rohan is that Bishop Stigand commissioned the work as a gift for Bishop Odo.⁴⁵ This would explain the balance of evidence paying due reverence to both Harold and William. Both bishops are featured in the work. Harold is addressed as *dux Anglorum* and *rex* whereas William as *Willelm dux* who may have received the title *rex* in the final scenes which are now lost. The BT clearly shows Harold receiving the blessing of Edward in the deathbed scene and as a fully consecrated king. As Keats-Rohan put it 'The Bayeux Tapestry is Stigand's version of events, simultaneously his homage to Harold and his flattery of Odo and by extension William.'⁴⁶

CONCLUSION

When the evidence is considered it must be remembered that the Norman accounts were written with hindsight to support the legitimacy of William's claim to the throne. The English were contemporary or near contemporary. So can anything be found that will immortalise Harold; take him beyond 1066? There is one final issue which is the crux of the matter. It lay in the hands of Edward himself to settle, that of the gift and right of succession a complicated matter in the eleventh-century. Why did Edward submit to the Godwins on the occasions he did and not make a clear settlement on William, as a relative, for the crown? Without an heir from his marriage Harold may have been considered a good substitute and that is why we see the deathbed gift of the crown. The Godwins for Edward may have been the way to continue Anglo-Saxon rule in England. They were strong and proved themselves in battle and Edward may have hoped that would be enough allowing him to avoid the difficult discussion with William. Having finally fallen on the battlefield at Hastings what legacy does Harold have left; he become a hostage to fortune, but took his chance, could he have saved the nation for the tyranny of the Normans, Danes and others. Did he take on too much, was he as Peter Rex titles his book 'Doomed'?

The Waltham Chronicle was part of the private estate of Edward Harley and after it was brought by the British Museum in 1753 and analysed by researchers what was discovered could shed new light on Harold's story. Part of the text is the record of the epitaph on his tomb at Waltham. The tomb was lost at the Reformation but the record was not.

⁴⁵ K. S. B. Keats-Rohan, 'Through the eye of the Needle: Stigand, the Bayeux Tapestry and the beginnings of the *Historia Anglorum*', in ed., David Roffe, *The English and Their Legacy, 900-1200 Essays in Honour of Ann Williams* (Suffolk: Boydell Press, 2012) pp. 159-174, (p. 173).

⁴⁶ Keats-Rohan, p. 173.

Blessed father of our country, Harold marked out by your merits,
You, your shield, fist, and sword: now a mound covers you,
Who, taken now from this world's light with the fierce king, [Harold Hardrada]
Do not fear the trumpet's blast issuing from the north.
An omen, but a bad one, turned your standards towards the south
That you might learn your fate when hastening into unknown wars.

In this tomb brave Harold rests
who once famed King of England was
on whom renown, mien, character and authority
conferred power and a kingdom, a sceptre and a crown as well.
Until He strove, a Famous Warrior, to defend his very own
people, but died, slain by men of France.
The Fates, so envious of his noble conquests,
kill him they cannot save, and pursue deceit.⁴⁷

The text reads like a lament of what could have been; the Fates were against him, what emerges is a different attitude to Harold and maybe a truer picture. The chronicle shows him to be a religious man who like a lot of the elite at the time collected relics and gave them to the churches and monasteries they either founded or sponsored. Harold inherited Waltham from Tovi the Proud, a 'staller', an important and wealthy member of the retinue of King Cnut. The chronicle documents the journey of the 'black crucifix' unearthed by Tovi at Montacute and taken to Waltham which then became a place of pilgrimage including for Harold. The Chronicle lists donations from benefactors including the cross and a list of Harold's gifts.⁴⁸

The Waltham Chronicle was compiled just before the abbey was given to the Augustine order in 1177, including texts of much earlier dates, records not only the history of the donors and patrons but also its development and Harold's devotion to the abbey. He rebuilt the church, consecrated on the feast of Finding the Holy Cross on 3 May in 1060 by archbishop Cynesige of York and went on to found a cathedral school run by a dean, Wulfwine along with funding twelve cannons.⁴⁹ Harold's body, as seems possible, was taken to Waltham as suggested by William of Malmesbury and Wace.⁵⁰ The promotion of the pilgrimage to the 'Holy Cross' could have been used to deflect any overt interest in Harold and kept his tomb safe. The issue is not really his life and his

⁴⁷ Harley, MS 3776 fol. 62r-62v.

The Waltham Chronicle, trans. and ed. by Leslie Watkiss and Marjorie Chibnall (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994)

⁴⁸ *The Foundation of Waltham Abbey*, ed. by William Stubbs (London: J. H. and J. Parker, 1861)

⁴⁹ I. W. Walker, *Harold, The last Anglo-Saxon King* (Gloucestershire: the History Press, 2010) p 82, 98 and 143.

⁵⁰ WM, p.218. Wace p.192.

death on the battlefield, which is overshadowed by the Norman victory, but his legacy. William did not abandon the sound parts of Anglo-Saxon government that Harold had already put in place - he embraced them.⁵¹ Harold's legacy is more subtle and maybe as more research is done and more texts are explored we may be able to see a more truer picture of the 'Last Anglo-Saxon King'. His aim for the kingdom was unity, he set up and left institutions that were continued by his supporters and we can see him in the pages of the benefactors of abbeys like Malmesbury, Peterborough, Abingdon and Durham Cathedral who recorded an obit in their *Liber Vitae*.⁵² His name is written on pubs signs and on academic institutions and in streets from Colchester and Lerwick to Havering and of course in Waltham, but also on the hearts of the Anglo-Saxons of England.

(Text word count 4445)

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⁵¹ Rex, p. 265.

⁵² Walker, p. 81.

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