

Assessment 2 - Commentary

From “William of Malmesbury: The Battle of Hastings, 1066”
<https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/source/1066malmesbury.asp>

Selected passage:

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

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

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

William was a Benedictine monk from Malmesbury Abbey who was born around 1090 and had both Norman and Anglo-Saxon ancestry.¹ He was a noted scholar who wrote the *Gesta Regum Anglorum* history of English Kings, from which this excerpt on the 1066 Battle of

¹ R.M. Thompson, ‘William of Malmesbury’, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, 2004, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/29461> [Accessed 5 Nov 2022].

Hastings is taken.^{2,3} I selected this passage because, while it is set within the details of the Battle of Hastings, it is focused more on describing the greater community of the Anglo-Saxons proceeding the battle, and I was curious as to why this would have been included following an otherwise straightforward re-telling of the events at Hastings. It was also interesting to me that the work is not as biased towards the victors as much as some of the gesta works we have studied in class.

One explanation for this comes from the realization that the passage comes from the *Gesta Regum Anglorum*, meaning the goal is to recount the deeds of the kings of England and not solely William the Conqueror or the Norman kings. William of Malmesbury was attempting to write with some impartiality and show both positive and negative sides of the defeated Anglo-Saxons in his section on the Battle of Hastings. Earlier in the work, William does refer to Harold as “King Harold”, so it seems that he did recognize Harold as a legitimate ruler for his history of English kings. This is likely the reason William treats the Anglo-Saxons with some deference and not just as a defeated population in his section on the Battle of Hastings.

This more balanced approach does lend credibility to the work, as it removes some of the bias which is found in other gesta works from the medieval period. One aspect that is missing from William’s work that would lend additional authenticity is an indication of his sources. The passage is written in a third-person narrative style and recounts events decades and centuries before he was born, so William is not providing first-hand accounts. In the prologue to book two of the *Gesta Regum Anglorum*, where the Battle of Hastings entry resides, William mentions that

² R.M. Thompson, 2004.

³ James Harvey Robinson, ed., *Readings in European History*, 2 Vols. (Boston: Ginn & Co., 1904-06), Vol. I: *From the Breaking up of the Roman Empire to the Protestant Revolt*, p.224-9.

he had tried to find suitable histories of the period but was unsuccessful.⁴ This lack of citation is not unusual for the period, but it does mean the reader should cross-reference the work against others to contextualize the Anglo-Saxon actions William claims occurred.

The first section of the selected passage is quite complimentary to the Anglo-Saxons. William says the Anglo-Saxons were originally “barbarians” but became peaceful and civilized after converting to Christianity. He praises nobles who had the means to “indulge in pleasure” but instead chose a more righteous path and the abundance of religious men and saints found across England. The praise is tempered, however, as he concludes the second section with a rhetorical question pondering if some saints may have been forgotten “through the want of records”, suggesting there was lax record-keeping. This indicates why William has taken the time to capture the history of English kings. Clearly, he felt it was important to document and preserve historic records to pass down information through the ages. The preface of the *Gesta Regum Anglorum* further supports this, as William tells the Princes of England his goal is to “make you live forever in our writings.”⁵

In the third section of the selected passage, William claims there was eventually a decline in “the attention to literature and religion” in English society, and a return to a life of “luxury and wantonness”. He rebukes priests as negligent in their religious duties, being content with “a little confused learning” and “scarcely stammer[ing]” through hurried services. Laypeople were not spared a scolding either, as William claims anyone with good grammar was “an object of wonder and astonishment” and that the nobles began taking advantage of the poor to amass wealth and

⁴ J.A. Giles, ed., Author’s Epistle from *William of Malmesbury’s Chronicle of the Kings of England* (London: 1847) Project Gutenberg, 2015, <https://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/50778/pg50778-images.html#AUTHOR> [accessed 16 Nov 2022].

⁵ J.A. Giles, ed., 2015.

squandered it on partying. This implies a lack of foresight into thinking of the future, and by extension, the afterlife.

It is never explicitly stated, but the insinuation by the end of the selected passage is that this regression away from Christ was the reason the more pious Normans were victorious at the Battle of Hastings. An earlier section of the Hastings entry recounts how the Anglo-Saxons were drinking and singing all night before the battle while the Normans were preparing themselves for battle through the sacraments of communion and confession. Truer to a typical gesta format, William is demonstrating to the reader that the Normans were better Christians than the Anglo-Saxons, who were not behaving properly at the time of the Conquest.

Implying a religious rationale for the victory is not surprising given that the author is a monk; one would likely expect to see reminders of the teachings of Christ, even in a piece documenting historic events. Outside of the selected passage there are examples in the Hastings entry where William is critical of the Normans as well. Near the end of the Hastings section, he concedes the Normans are not above bribery or using force to succeed and can “weigh treachery by its chance of success”, which are not exactly Christian endeavors. It is likely, as a result of his training and vocation, William can not help but remind the reader that no one is perfect but God.

Having analyzed the selected passage in more detail, I believe William is sending a subtle message to future Kings of England who would be reading his *Gesta Regum Anglorum*. He is warning those to come that, no matter how pious or devoted you may have been in the past, it must be maintained lest you, too, end up conquered by a more devout Christian someday.

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