

The *Gesta Willelmi* of William of

Poitiers

At 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 verge 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 despatched 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 [vicarius] 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 a 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.

The prime mover of this audacious enterprise was Conan, son of Alan. When he came of age, he proved to be ferocious in the extreme: once free of the guardianship he had long endured, he seized Eudo, his uncle on his father's side, loaded him with chains, threw him into prison, and began to exercise power over the province which his father had left him, with extreme violence. Then, renewing his father's rebellion, he wanted to be the enemy, not the vassal, of Normandy. William, who was his overlord by ancient right (just as he was lord of the Normans), placed a castle called St James on the frontier with Brittany, for fear that furnished raiders would come and ravage the defenceless churches and the people of the most remote area of his lands. For Charles [the Simple], king of France, had bought the peace and friendship of Rollo, the first duke of the Normans, and ancestor of the future dukes, by giving him his daughter Gisela in marriage and Brittany in perpetual servitude. The Franks, unable to resist with their swords the Danish axes any longer, had obtained this treaty with prayers, as the pages of their annals bear witness. For this reason, the counts of Brittany could never entirely shake off the yoke of Norman domination, although they tried several times to do so with all their might. Alan and Conan, more closely related to the rulers of Normandy, were all the more proud and arrogant in opposing them. The boldness of Conan was such that he did not hesitate to announce the date on which he was going to attack the Norman frontier. This man, by temperament violent and at an impetuous age, was greatly helped by the fidelity of a widely-dispersed region which had more warriors in it than one would have believed.

For in these parts, one single warrior begets fifty, having ten or more shared wives, in the barbarian fashion: it is a custom derived from the ancient Moors, ignorant of divine law and chaste morals. This multitude devote themselves principally to arms and horsemanship, and hardly study farming or morals. They live chiefly on milk, very little on bread. Fat pastures nourish their flocks in vast spaces where the harvest is almost unknown. When they are not at war, they live by rapine and brigandry, or civil strife, or exercise themselves in these ways. They go into battle with eager haste, and in the struggle they strike out furiously. They are used to repulsing their enemy, and only yield with difficulty. Victory and glory won in combat are greeted with great rejoicing and pride; they like to despoil these whom they have killed, regarding it as an honour and a pleasure.

Without taking the least notice of these terrible customs, duke William, remembering the day on which Conan had announced his attack, set out in person to meet him on enemy territory. The latter, fearing the imminence of a thunderbolt, fled headlong, abandoning the siege of Dol, a castle in his own lands. This castle, opposed to the rebellion, remained faithful to the just cause. Its defender, Rivallon, tried to retain Conan, recalling him ironically, begging him to wait for another two days, saying that this would be long enough to arrange his ransom. Conan, terrified and miserable, heeded his fear instead, and fled even further off. The fearsome commander who pursued him would have chased the fugitive, if he had not realised the obvious danger of leading a large army across deserted, starved and unknown country. If anything remained of the previous year's produce, in this deprived land, their inhabitants had hidden it in a safe place, along with their flocks. Therefore, fearing that the goods of the Church might be sacrilegiously pillaged, if the army came across

them, he led them back, exhausted by the lack of provisions; he also assumed that Conan would soon beg for his crime to be pardoned, and submit to his mercy. But hardly had he crossed the frontier of Brittany when he learnt that Geoffrey of Anjou, with a large force, had joined Conan and that the two of them were preparing to give battle the next day. He showed himself all the more eager to engage in combat, because he deemed it more glorious to defeat two enemies, both redoubtable in themselves, in one combat. From such a victory he would derive many advantages.

However, Rivallon, on whose territory the army had encamped, did not cease to complain. He would prefer to have been delivered from his enemy without the damage caused by so doing ruining his whole sief. If the duke settled down to await the enemy in such an unfertile and exhausted place, it would be totally ruined. It made no difference to the peasants whether they were ruined by the deeds of the Norman army or by those of the Bretons; they would still lose the fruits of the year's labours. The expulsion of Conan had so far brought Rivallon fame, rather than the ruin of his goods. The duke replied that he must consider whether a hasty departure would be misinterpreted, and promised to pay in gold compensation for any damage. From then on, he forbade his soldiers to take grain or animals. They obeyed this order so strictly that one grain of corn would have repaid all the harm done. The duke waited in vain for battle; the enemy continued to flee even further off.

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. Thus, Harold, we address these brief reproaches to you. What inspired you to dare, after these good deeds, to despoil William of his inheritance and to fight against him, you who by a sacrosanct oath of word and hand, had recognised as master of both yourself and your nation? What you should have repressed, you wickedly encouraged. The favourable breeze which swelled your black-hearted sails on the return voyage was impious, the calm sea which bore you was impious in allowing itself to carry you to the other shore, O most shameful of men. The harbour which received you was ill-starred, you who were going to drag your country into the most disastrous shipwreck.

Suddenly news came that England had lost its king, Edward, and Harold had been crowned in his place. This foolish Englishman did not await a public election, but on the day of mourning when the good king was buried and the whole nation lamented, he broke his oath and seized the throne by acclamation, thanks to the support of some iniquitous partisans. He received an unholy consecration at the hands of Stigand, who had been deprived of the office of priest by the just zeal of a papal anathema. Duke William, having consulted his men, decided to avenge this offence and regain his inheritance by force of arms, despite many who used clever arguments to dissuade him from such an arduous enterprise, as being well beyond the power of the Norman forces. In those days Normandy had among its councillors besides bishops and abbots, outstanding laymen, the light and ornament of the gathering, whose reputation they much enhanced: Robert, count of Mortain; Robert, count of Eu, brother of the bishop of Lisieux, Hugh; Richard, count of Evreux, son of archbishop Robert; Roger de Beaumont; Roger de Montgomery; William Fitz Osbern; Hugh, viscount [of Avranches]. Thanks to their wisdom and efforts, the land remained unharmed. With them to look after it, the Roman republic would not have needed two hundred

senators, if it had retained its ancient power until today. In the discussions, however, we know that they all yielded to the wisdom of the prince, as if he had known in advance, by divine inspiration, what needed to be done and what needed to be avoided. To those who act piously, God has given wisdom, writes a man who is learned in divine matters.

With admirable prudence, William ordered the provision of ships, arms, men and supplies, and all other things necessary for war; almost all Normandy was devoted to the task, and it would take too long to describe the preparations in detail. Equally, he made arrangements for the government and security of Normandy in his absence. Numerous soldiers from outside the duchy arrived to offer their help, partly motivated by the famed generosity of the duke, but all fully confident in the justice of his cause.

He forbade all forms of pillage, and fed at his own expense 50,000 soldiers while contrary winds detained them for a month at the mouth of the river Dives. His moderation and prudence lay in the fact that he paid most of the expenses of his soldiers and guests, and would not allow anyone to take anything whatsoever. The inhabitants of the countryside around grazed their herds of cows or sheep in safety, both in the fields and on the open pasture. The corn awaited the reaper's scythe untouched, without being trampled by the soldiers or cut down by foragers. However weak or defenceless, any man could pass through countryside, singing as he rode, watching, but not fearing, the squadrons of soldiers.

At this time the see of St Peter at Rome was occupied by pope Alexander, the most worthy of all to rule over the universal church. Whoever consulted him received a just and salutary answer. He had been bishop of Lucca, and had no ambition for a higher rank, but the urgent council of several persons whose authority was respected by the Romans, supported by the agreement of a large assembly, had raised him to his present standing as primate, to preside over, as their head and master, all the bishops throughout the world. He deserved this election by his sanctity and the purity of his teaching. In later years his virtues shone from east to west: just as the sun, by the laws of nature, follows an unchanging course, so he followed the truth throughout his life, condemning iniquity wherever he could, without compromise.

Having sought the approval of the pope and informed him of the enterprise he was undertaking, the duke received through his favour a standard, which was a sign of the protection of St Peter, as a result of which he was able to march more confidently and safely against his adversary. He had recently formed a friendly alliance with Henry, son of the emperor Henry and grandson of Conrad; under the terms of this, Germany would lend him military assistance against any enemy, should he request it. The Danish king, Svend, had sworn a pact with him after various negotiations; but he showed himself to be the faithful ally of the duke's enemies, as you will see later when you read of the disasters that befell him.

Harold, meanwhile, prepared to give battle by sea or land, drawing up a huge army on the shore, and sending out spies in secret. One of these was captured, and as he tried to disguise the reason for his presence using the story he had been briefed to tell, the duke showed his magnanimity in these words: 'What need has Harold to buy the devotion and labour, for gold and silver, of men like you who come to spy on us? Our determination, our preparations – are there any more certain indications he would like, other than my actual presence? Take this message to him from me: he can live for the rest of his days in peace, if within a year from now, he has not seen me in the place which he regards as his most secure refuge.'

Stunned by such a rash promise, many of the Norman magnates did not hide their mistrust. Inspired by cowardice, they exaggerated in discussions the strength of Harold's army and the weakness of their own. According to them, Harold had distributed large sums and thus won over leaders and powerful kings; he had a numerous fleet and seamen expert in nautical matters, who had often endured the dangers of the sea and naval battles; his kingdom, both for numbers of soldiers and financial resources, was much superior to the duke's domains. Who could therefore hope that within the allotted time, the space of a year, the ships could be built and rowers could be found? Who did not fear that this expedition would not reduce a prosperous country to the most miserable state? Who dare to say that even the forces of a Roman emperor could bring such a difficult enterprise to a successful conclusion?

But the duke rallied the waverers with the following speech: 'We know Harold's wisdom, and fear it, but nonetheless it makes us hopeful. He spends his money in vain: he dissipates his gold without making his position any stronger. He is not stout-hearted enough to promise the least part of my lands. As for me, I shall promise and distribute as I choose both my own lands and those which are said to be his. For there is no doubt that whoever is bold enough to dispose of his enemy's possessions as though they were his own will overcome his enemy. The problem of shipping will not prevent us, because we shall soon have enough vessels. Let them learn what, if fortune favours us, we shall soon demonstrate: that it is the valour rather than the number of soldiers which wins battles. Besides, he will be fighting to keep his ill-gotten gains: we simply lay claim to what we have been given and have acquired by good deeds. It is this fundamental certainty on our side, which, putting aside every danger, will assure us triumph, honour and glory.'

For this wise and faithful man knew that almighty God, who desires no evil, would not let a just cause fail, particularly when he considered that he did not aim so much to increase his personal power and glory as to reform Christian practices in this land.

Now the whole fleet, so carefully prepared, set sail from the mouth of the Dives and neighbouring ports, where it had waited so long for a south wind in order to cross, and was carried by the west wind towards the anchorage of Saint Valéry. There too, through prayers, offerings and vows the prince entrusted himself to the assistance of Heaven; he had not been dissuaded by contrary winds, terrible shipwrecks or the cowardly desertion of several of those who had given their word. Dealing with his problems by wise behaviour, he buried those who had drowned, hiding the fact as far as possible and burying them secretly. Increasing his supplies each day, he warded off famine. By a variety of encouragements, he regained those who had been overcome with fear, and put heart into the waverers. He fought using holy prayers, and went as far as bringing the body of St Valéry, a confessor most acceptable to God, out of the cathedral in order to ensure that the contrary wind became a favourable one. All the warriors who were departing with him took part in this demonstration of humility.

At last the long-awaited breeze arose: they gave thanks to heaven with voice and hand, and all shouted together to encourage each other. They left shore as quietly as possible and set out very eagerly on this voyage whose outcome remained uncertain. Their haste was such that while someone called a man at arms, someone else his companion, most of them, heedless of their subordinates, companions or even vital equipment, were only fearful of being left on shore, and hastened on board. The duke, however, urged any laggards whom he saw to embark as quickly as possible.

Because he feared that they might make a landfall before dawn on the shore

towards which they were sailing, and might be at risk in a dangerous or unknown anchorage, he made a crier announce that once they were on the open sea, they should wait for a while, and all the ships should anchor around his, until a fire was lit at his masthead and they heard a trumpet call as signal to resume their voyage.

Ancient Greece has passed down the story of the vengeance of Agamemnon of the house of Atreus who set out to redeem his brother's marital honour with a thousand ships: we bear witness, that William went to reclaim his royal crown with a greater number. Men tell how Xerxes linked the famous towns of Sestos and Abydos, separated by the sea, with a bridge of ships. We for our part proclaim how – and it is true – William reunited under the single governance of his power the whole extent of Norman and English land. William, whom no-one has yet surpassed, has adorned his country with magnificent trophies and made it illustrious with the greatest triumphs: we think that he is the equal of Xerxes, who was conquered by a stronger enemy, and deprived of his fleet, and indeed that he surpasses him in courage.

The ships set sail again after their nocturnal halt; the one which the duke was in was so swift that it left the others far behind it, as if it wished to respond by its speed to the man who urged it on to victory with all his zeal. In the morning, a rower, ordered to see from the top of the mast if any ships were coming after them, declared that he could see nothing on the horizon but sea and sky. They anchored at once, and to prevent his companions from becoming fearful and dismayed, the intrepid duke had a plentiful and cheerful meal, as if he was in his own hall, served with spiced wine, asserting that the other ships would not be long in arriving, guided by God to whose keeping he had entrusted them. Virgil, the prince of poets, whose songs in praise of the Trojan Aeneas, ancestor and glory of early Rome, would not have thought the self-control which William showed at this feast unworthy of his pen. When the watch was asked again what he could see, he shouted that he could see four ships; at the third question, he declared that there were so many that it seemed like a forest rigged with sails. At that point the duke's hope changed to joy: how he praised divine mercy from the bottom of his heart, we leave to the imagination.

Borne by a favourable breeze to Pevensey, he disembarked with ease and without having to fight his way ashore. Harold, indeed, had withdrawn to Yorkshire to fight his own brother Tostig and the king of Norway, Harold. It was hardly astonishing that his brother, driven by wrongs done to him and wishing to recover his confiscated lands, should invoke foreign aid against him; Harold's sister, too, morally quite unlike him, used vows and advice to oppose him, because he was a man soiled by luxury, a cruel homicide, proud of his wealth and plunder, an enemy of justice and goodness. This woman, as wise as any man, who recognised goodness and cherished it in her way of life, intended that the man whom her husband Edward had chosen by adopting him as his son should rule over the English: William the wise, just and strong.

War between duke William and Harold of England. The rejoicing Normans, once they had landed, occupied Pevensey, where they built their first camp, and built another at Hastings, providing a refuge for themselves and a shelter for their boats. Marius and Pompey the great, both distinguished by their intelligence and energy, deserved their triumphs, one for bringing Jugurtha to Rome in chains, the other for forcing Mithridates to drink poison: but even they, when they led an entire army into enemy territory, were afraid to expose themselves to danger by taking one legion and leaving the main body of their troops. It was their custom, like the generals of today, to send out scouts, rather than to go themselves, more anxious about their own safety

than wishing to leave such duties to their army. But William, taking no more than twenty-five knights, boldly explored the lie of the land and its inhabitants. He came back on foot because the paths were so difficult, and laughed at having to do so; and – the reader may laugh at this – he earned yet more praise by carrying on his shoulders not only his own hauberk, but also that of one of his companions, famous for his strength and courage, William Fitz Osbern.

A rich inhabitant of these parts, Norman by birth, Robert, son of the lady Wimarc, sent a message to his lord and relative the duke at Hastings, in the following words: 'King Harold, having fought his own brother and the king of Norway, who was regarded as the most valiant warrior under heaven, has killed both of them in one battle, destroying their powerful armies. Encouraged by this success, he is returning to meet you by forced marches, at the head of a very numerous and strong army: against him, your men will be no more use, in my opinion, than as many vile curs. You are reputed to be a clever man; until now you have managed your affairs in peace and war with wisdom. Now you should act with caution, and beware of hurling yourself into a danger from which you cannot escape. I advise you to remain behind your fortifications and to refrain from giving battle for the time being.' But the duke replied to the messenger: 'Take my thanks to your master for his advice, in which he counsels prudence, though it would have been better put in less insulting words. Tell him that I will not hide behind ditches and palisades, but will engage Harold's army as soon as possible: I would not despair of crushing him and his men, with God's help, because my troops are so bold, even if I had only ten thousand warriors instead of the sixty thousand I have brought.'

One day, when the duke was inspecting the guard who protected the ships, a monk sent as an ambassador by Harold, was announced to him as he came from the ships. He went at once to find him, and cunningly said: 'There is no-one closer to William, count of the Normans, than I, his seneschal. You will have no way of speaking to him except through me: tell me what message you bring. He will be glad to learn of it through me, because no-one is dearer to him than me. Afterwards you can come and talk to him as you wish.' Once he had learnt the purpose of the embassy through what the monk told him, the duke at once made arrangements that he should be received as a guest and treated with every respect. Meanwhile, he and his men debated how to reply to the message.

The next day, seated amidst his magnates, he had the monk summoned, and said: 'I am William, by grace of God prince of the Normans. What you told me yesterday, please repeat in the presence of these men.' The messenger said: 'This is the message that King Harold sends to you. You have invaded his lands, whether from self-confidence or boldness, he does not know. He remembers that King Edward at first resolved to make you heir to the kingdom of England and that he himself gave you his pledge in Normandy. Equally, he knows that this kingdom belongs to him by right, because the same king, his lord, gave it to him on his deathbed. Now, since the time when Saint Augustine came to this land, the common custom of the nation is that a donation made by a dying man is held as valid. He therefore asks you and your men to leave the land which is his by right. Otherwise he will break the oath of friendship and the articles which he confirmed to you in Normandy, and the responsibility will be entirely yours.'

When he heard Harold's message, the duke asked the monk if the latter would take his own ambassador safely to Harold. He promised to look after the messenger's safety just as he would his own. At once, the duke instructed a monk from Fécamp

to carry a message promptly to Harold. 'It is neither boldness nor injustice, but mature reflection and the quest for justice which have led me to cross to this land, of which King Edward, my lord and relative, made me the heir, as Harold himself admits, because of the high honours and numerous benefices which I and my ancestors have conferred on him and his brother, as well as their men, and because, of all the men of his race, he believed me to be the most worthy and capable of supporting him in his lifetime, and of governing the kingdom after his death. He would not have done this without the agreement of his magnates, by the advice of archbishop Stigand, earl Godwin, earl Leofric, and earl Siward: all of them subscribed under oath that they would receive me as lord after the death of Edward and would never during his lifetime attempt to seize the kingdom by plotting against me. He gave as hostages Godwin's son and grandson. Finally, he sent Harold himself to Normandy, so that, he and I both being present, he would swear what his father and the other men already named had sworn in my absence. But, on his voyage towards me, he was in danger of being taken prisoner and I rescued him by strength and wisdom. Harold made himself my vassal by doing homage, and gave me surety in writing for my claim for the kingdom of England. I am ready to plead my case in a court wherever he pleases, either by English law or by Norman law. If, according to the verdict of law, either Normans or English decide that the kingdom belongs to him legitimately, let him possess it in peace. But if they decide that it should be restored to me, let him hand it over to me. However, if he rejects the proposal, I do not think that it is just to make my men fight his men and die as a result, because they have no part in our quarrel. I am ready to wager my head against his [in single combat] that I have a better right to the English kingdom than him.'

Such were the words of the duke: we have chosen to set them before everyone's eyes, rather than our own version, because we want to ensure for him eternal fame. It is a good illustration of his wisdom, justice, piety and boldness. The force of his argument, when considered (and Cicero, the best of the Roman orators, could not have weakened it) demolishes the arguments of Harold. In short, he was ready to abide by whatever judgment customary law decreed. He refused to condemn his enemies the English to die because of his personal quarrel. His wish was to decide the matter in single combat, at the risk of his own head.

As soon as the monk gave this message to Harold, who was approaching, he went pale with astonishment and remained silent for a long time, as if struck dumb. The messenger asked for an answer, not once but several times; at first he replied: 'We will continue our advance' and then 'We will march on to victory.' The messenger insisted on another reply, saying: 'The duke does not want the armies to be destroyed, but wishes for a single combat.' For this intrepid and good man preferred to renounce a just claim rather than cause the death of many men. He was sure that Harold's head would fall, because he was less brave and had an unjust cause. Finally Harold, raising his eyes to heaven, exclaimed: 'Let the Lord decide today between William and myself according to justice!' Blinded by his desire to rule, forgetful in his haste of the injustice of his cause, he chose, to his own ruin, his conscience as just judge.

In the meanwhile, trusted soldiers, sent out as scouts on the duke's orders, announced the imminent arrival of the enemy, because the king in his fury had hastened his march, particularly because he had learnt of the devastation around the Norman camp. He intended to surprise them and to crush them in a nocturnal or surprise attack. And in case they took to flight he had armed a fleet of seven hundred boats to ambush them on the sea. The duke hastily ordered all those who were in the camp to

arm themselves, for many of his companions had gone foraging that day. He himself attended the mystery of the Mass with the greatest devotion, and took communion of the body and blood of our Lord, strengthening both body and soul. He humbly placed around his neck the relics whose protection Harold had forfeited when he broke the oath which he had sworn on them. Two bishops were with him, Odo of Bayeux and Geoffrey of Coutances; with them were a number of clergy and some monks. They gathered and prepared to fight the enemy with prayers. The duke put on his hauberk reversed to the left: anyone else would have been terrified, but the duke laughed this off as pure chance instead of taking it as a sinister happening.

The speech with which he rallied the courage and eagerness of his troops, although brief due to the circumstances, was doubtless a fine one, although it has not come down to us in all its splendour. He reminded the Normans that under his command they had always been victorious in many and great dangers. He reminded everyone of their country, their noble deeds and their great name. 'Now you must prove with your hands the stuff of which you are made, the spirit that inspires you. Now it is no longer a matter of living and ruling but of escaping with your lives from imminent danger. If you fight manfully, victory, honour, and riches will be yours; otherwise you will be slain or as captives, you will serve the whims of a most cruel enemy, and will be remembered for ever with shame. There is no way of escape: on the one hand, an army and an unknown and hostile countryside bar the way, on the other, a navy and the sea. Men should not be frightened by numbers. On many occasions the English, defeated by the swords of their enemies, have perished; most of the time, they have been conquered and have had to surrender to the enemy. They have never distinguished themselves by great deeds of arms. Men inexperienced in battle can be easily overcome by the courage and skill of a few. Above all, divine help will not be lacking for a just cause. If such a band are daring, and do not yield, victory will soon be theirs to celebrate.'

He advanced with his troops in the following highly advantageous order, behind the banner which the pope had sent him. In the vanguard he placed infantry armed with bows and crossbows; behind them were also infantry, but more steady and armed with hauberks; in the rear, the cavalry squadrons, in the midst of which he took his place with the elite. From this position he could command the whole army by voice and gesture. If an author from antiquity had described Harold's army, he would have said that as it passed rivers dried up, the forests became open country. For from every part of the country large numbers of English had gathered. Some were moved by affection for Harold, all by love of their country, which they wished to defend from strangers, even though the cause was unjust. Considerable help had been sent from the land of the Danes, to whom they were related. But, frightened of attacking William, whom they feared more than the king of Norway, on equal terms, they camped on higher ground, a hill close to the forest through which they had come. They immediately dismounted and went on foot, drawn up one close to the other. The duke and his men, in no way frightened by the difficulty of the place, began slowly to climb the steep slope.

The terrible sound of the trumpets announced on both sides the beginning of the battle. The Normans boldly and swiftly launched the attack. Just as when speakers plead a case of theft before a judge, the plaintiff opens the proceedings. So the Norman infantry advanced closer, provoking the English, and causing wounds and death with their missiles. The latter resisted bravely, each according to their means. They threw javelins and all sorts of darts, the most lethal of axes and stones fixed to

pieces of wood. Under this deadly hail you might have thought that our men would be crushed. The mounted warriors came to the rescue, and those who had been in the rear found themselves in front. Disdaining to fight from a distance, they rode into battle using their swords. The great war-cries, here Norman, there barbarian, were drowned by the noise of battle and the groans of the dying. So for a time both sides fought fiercely. The English were greatly helped by the higher position which they held; they did not have to march to the attack, but remained tightly grouped. Their numbers and the strength of their army, as well as their weapons of attack, which penetrated without difficulty shields and other pieces of armour were also to their advantage. So they resisted vigorously or repulsed those who dared to attack them at close quarters with swords. They even wounded those who threw spears at them from a distance. So, frightened by such ferocity, the infantry and Breton mounted warriors both retreated, with all the auxiliary troops who formed the left wing. Almost the whole of the duke's army yielded – in saying this, no shame is intended for the unconquered Norman race. The armies of Rome in her majesty, even when they contained royal contingents and however accustomed they were to victory on land or sea, sometimes retreated when they learnt that their leader had been slain, or believed that he had been. The Normans believed that their duke and lord had been killed. Their retreat was not a shameful flight, but a sorrowful withdrawal.

The prince, seeing the greater part of the enemy camp setting out in pursuit of his men, hurled himself in front of the fugitives, and stopped them by striking them or menacing them with his lance. Then, having uncovered his head and taken off his helmet, he shouted: 'Look at me! I am alive, and will be the victor, with God's help! What madness induces you to flee? What avenue of retreat is open to you? Those whom you could have slaughtered like sheep have driven you back and are killing you! You are deserting victory and inextinguishable glory to lose yourselves in flight and eternal shame! By fleeing, none of you will escape death.' With these words, they regained courage. At their head he hurled himself forward and with the lightning of his sword he devastated the enemy nation which had rebelled against him, their lawful king, and deserved to be slaughtered.

Strengthened in their resolve, they attacked with increased vigour the enemy army which, despite having sustained very great losses, did not seem any less in number. The English confidently resisted with all their strength, striving above all to prevent a breach in their line opening under the assault. Their extraordinarily tight formation meant that those who were killed hardly had room to fall. Even so, some breaches opened under the sword-blows of the most doughty fighters. They were made by the men of Maine, the French, Bretons, men from Aquitaine, but above all by the Normans, with unequalled courage. A certain young Norman, Robert, son of Roger of Beaumont, nephew and heir of Hugh, count of Meulan, through his mother Adeline, was fighting that day for the first time; he carried out an exploit which deserves everlasting praise. At the head of the battalion at the right wing which he commanded, he attacked and brought down the enemy with great boldness. We cannot, nor do we intend to, narrate everyone's exploits as they merit. The most fertile writer, if he had been eyewitness of this war, would have great difficulty in describing each small detail, and we wish to hasten to finish the praise of Count William in order to celebrate the glory of King William.

Seeing that it would be impossible for them to overcome, without great loss to themselves, such a numerous enemy which offered a cruel resistance, the Normans and their allies turned their backs, pretending to take flight. They remembered how,

a little earlier, flight had led to the success they desired. Among the barbarians, who hoped that they were victorious, there was the greatest rejoicing. They urged each other on with cries of triumph while they abused our men and threatened to hurl themselves as one man on them. As before, several thousands were bold enough to rush forward, as if on wings, to pursue those who they took to be fleeing, when the Normans suddenly turned their horses' heads, stopped them in their tracks, crushed them completely and massacred them down to the last man.

Having twice used this trick with the same success, they attacked with the greatest vigour the rest of the army, which still inspired fear, and which was very difficult to surround. Then an unusual kind of combat ensued, one side attacking in bursts and in a variety of movements, the other rooted in the ground, putting up with the assault. The English weakened, and, as if they admitted their wrongdoing by defeat itself, they now undertook their punishment. The Normans shot arrows, wounded and transfixed men; the dead as they fell, moved more than the living. Even the lightly wounded could not escape, but perished under the dense heap of their companions. So fortune concurred in William's triumph by hastening it.

There took part in this battle Eustace, count of Boulogne; William, son of Richard, count of Evreux; Geoffrey, son of Rotrou, count of Mortagne; William Fitz Osbern; Aimery, viscount of Thouars; Walter Giffard, Hugh of Montfort, Ralph of Tosny, Hugh of Grandmesnil, William of Warrenne, and a great number of others, outstanding for their eminence as soldiers and fame, whose names should be written in history books among those of the bravest warriors. As for William, their leader, he surpassed them in both courage and wisdom, and should rightly be placed above some of the Greek and Roman leaders so highly praised in the records, and treated as the equal of others. His leadership in the battle was noble, preventing men from fleeing, inspiring courage in others, sharing danger, more often ordering his men to follow him than to advance. From this it is clear that his courage opened the way for his soldiers and encouraged their boldness. A not inconsiderable part of the enemy army lost heart merely at the sight of this astonishing and frightening horseman, before they had sustained any injury. Three horses were killed under him. Three times he intrepidly leapt to the ground and hastened to avenge the death of his warhorse. This shows his quickness, his strength of mind and body. The fury of his sword pierced shields, helmets and hauberks; he struck down several soldiers with his shield alone. His soldiers were astonished to see him fight on foot: many, already wounded, found new courage from his example. Some indeed, weak from loss of blood, leaned on their shields and fought manfully; others, unable to do more, encouraged their fellows to follow the duke fearlessly by shouts and gestures, lest they should let victory slip through their hands. He helped and rescued many of his men.

William would have been no more afraid to meet Harold, whom the poets compared to Hector or Turnus, in single combat, than Achilles or Aeneas, the ancient adversaries of the two heroes. Tydeus, attacked by fifty men, used a rock to defend himself; William, his equal, scarcely less well-born, did not fear to meet a thousand single-handed. The author of the *Thebaid* or *Aeneid*, who, after the fashion of poets, make great deeds even greater in their books, would have found the real exploits of this man a better subject for verse, and nearer to the truth. And if they had risen to the greatness of the topic, they had made him the subject of their songs, the beauty of their style would have earned him a place among the gods. But our feeble prose, which only proposes in humble fashion for the benefit of rulers, to relate his piety in worshipping the true God – who alone is great, eternal to the end of time and beyond,

must come shortly to the end of the true story of this battle, which he won justly and bravely.

At the close of the day, the English realised that they could no longer resist the Normans. They knew that they had been reduced in number by the death of many of their troops. The king himself, his brothers, and the leading men of the kingdom had been killed: those who remained were at the end of the struggle; and there was no hope of relief. They saw that the Normans were hardly weakened at all by the death of those who had been killed, and, as if they drew on new strength by fighting, they threatened them more fiercely than at the beginning. The duke in his fury spared no-one who opposed him, as if his valour as a soldier would only be satisfied by victory. So they fled, and left the field as quickly as they could, some seizing horses, others on foot, some by road, others across country. Some, covered in blood, struggled to flee, or were too weak to do so. The desire to escape alive gave strength to some. Many died in the depths of the forests: their pursuers found corpses all along the roads. The Normans, although they did not know the countryside, pursued them eagerly, slaughtering the fleeing rebels, setting the seal on their victory. Amidst the dead, the horses' hooves trampled all those who lay in their path.

However, those who fled regained confidence when they found a deep valley and numerous ditches. For this race, descendants of the ancient Saxons, the most ferocious of men, were always ready to cross swords. They would not have retreated except in face of an invincible force. They had just defeated with ease the king of Norway, at the head of a numerous, battle-hardened army. At the head of his victorious standards, the duke, seeing troops suddenly gathered and believing them to be newly arrived reinforcements, did not turn aside or halt; more fearsome, armed with the butt of his spear than those who brandished long javelins, he restrained by his manly voice count Eustace, who had turned back with fifty mounted soldiers and was getting ready to sound the retreat. The latter whispered in the duke's ear the advice that he should turn back, predicting instant death if he continued. While he said this, Eustace was struck between the shoulders by a blow whose sound and force showed themselves by blood flowing from his nose and mouth: half dead, he only escaped with the help of his companions. The duke, disdaining fear and failure, attacked and overcame his adversaries. In this conflict some of the most famous Norman warriors fell, because the difficulty of the lie of the land meant that they could not show their usual courage.

Having thus achieved his victory, the duke returned to the battlefield, found a scene of carnage which he could only look at with pity, even though the victims were wicked men and it is glorious and praiseworthy to kill a tyrant. The ground was covered with corpses for a vast distance, stained with blood: they were the flower of the nobility and youth of the English. Beside the king, two of his brothers were found: he himself, stripped of all marks of his rank, was recognised not by his face, but by certain signs; he was carried to the duke's camp, where the duke entrusted William Malet with the duty of burying him, but refused to hand over his body to his mother, who offered to pay its weight in gold. He was aware that it would not have been fitting to accept gold in exchange: and he also thought that it would not have been fitting to allow a man to be buried in accordance with his mother's wishes who by excessive greed had been responsible for the deaths of many who would never be properly buried. They said in jest that he should be made guardian of the shore and sea which, in his anger, he had earlier occupied.