

The Mercian Connection, Harold Godwineson's Ambitions, Diplomacy and Channel-crossing, 1056–1066

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Abstract

It is supposed that the *Vita Ædwardi* contains some information about Harold's dealings with William of Normandy in 1064. This article links these covert references with William of Poitiers' statements about Harold's diplomatic activities in France. The combination turns out to be fruitful. Harold's Channel-crossing was meant as a tour of diplomacy to win support for his candidacy for the throne of the English. This statement has implications for the sequence of events. Harold's expedition was a mere continuation of his diplomacy in the Midlands earlier in 1064, when he concluded a cunning deal with the rulers of Mercia. Part of the secret arrangement was the acquisition of Northumbria, so far ruled by his self-willed brother Tostig. Harold's unintended landfall in Ponthieu and captivity in Normandy set many things in motion. His explaining-away of his presence on the continent and his fabrications about a state mission revived William's latent interest in the English succession. After his return to England, Harold's extenuation of his inglorious, illegitimate promises to William did raise suspicion about the true nature of his Channel-crossing. Eventually, the full facts of his Mercian connection were revealed, resulting in Queen Edith's and Tostig's desperate moves to prevent the take-over in Northumbria.

Why did Harold Godwineson undertake his journey to northern France depicted on the Bayeux Tapestry, a journey that ended so dramatically? As Frank Stenton stated in 1943, no convincing answer has ever been given to this question, and this situation has not changed ever since.¹ The traditional Norman answer that it was a mission on behalf of King Edward the Confessor to promise the English throne to his heir, William of Normandy, is unacceptable for many reasons. There was no party in England which favoured William's cause; and Harold's oath was a very public, dishonourable ceremony that compromised

¹ Frank Stenton, *Anglo-Saxon England* (3rd edn., Oxford, 1971) [hereafter Stenton, *Anglo-Saxon England*], p. 578.

his own status and interests as the most important magnate in England.² Why should Harold go?

There is an argument, however, to give the Norman propagandists some credit. At the time the Bayeux Tapestry was fabricated most actors in the story were still alive, and so, as Stenton declared, it is unlikely to portray incidents which are entirely fictitious. Ian Walker has suggested that the Norman accounts about Harold's journey must have a basis in truth, otherwise their authors would lose credibility completely. Frank Barlow has argued that a complete fabrication of the whole case would seem an effrontery almost beyond belief.³ The answer of the Norman chroniclers might not be plausible, but it is highly consistent and even more persistent. Their stories are simply too elaborate to be mere fiction. But whoever put these ideas into their head?

This article tries to answer these interwoven questions, starting with an examination of the accounts of Harold's travels. Frank Barlow has noticed in the *Vita Ædwardi* 'some covert references' to Harold's dealings with William in Normandy in 1064.⁴ Is it possible to connect Harold's work of intelligence with his diplomatic activities mentioned in the *Gesta Guillelmi*? This article also attempts to discover the correct correlation between Harold's Channel-crossing of 1064 and the clash of ambitions on the battlefield of Hastings in 1066. Some modern historians see Duke William's aspiration as the long-term result⁵ of an old promise made in the name of King Edward. Harold's own ambition could be the product of his discovery that William intended to make a bid for the crown.⁶ Is this the right causality? This article attempts to set up the most acceptable chronology of political events in England and answer the questions about the causal relation between Harold's Channel-crossing, his preceding actions in Wales and Mercia, and the subsequent revolt against his brother Tostig in Northumbria.

Some records of Harold's Channel-crossings have been preserved: a charter dated 13 November 1056, confirmed in Saint-Omer in Artois by 'Haroldi Ducis'; a fragment from the biography of King Edward – the *Vita Ædwardi* – about an undated tour through France and a pilgrimage to Rome; two Norman chronicles about an undated mission under orders of King Edward, most probably in 1064. The last journey is also

² Objections are put forward in Ch. H. Gibbs-Smith, *The Bayeux Tapestry* (1973), p. 11; Eric John, 'Edward the Confessor and the Norman Succession', *English Historical Review*, xciv (1979) [hereafter John, 'Edward the Confessor'], 241–67, at 258–60; Frank Barlow, *The Godwins: The Rise and Fall of a Noble Dynasty* (2002) [hereafter Barlow, *The Godwins*], p. 105; Emma Mason, *The House of Godwine: The History of a Dynasty* (2004) [hereafter Mason, *House of Godwine*], pp. 110–11.

³ Stenton, *Anglo-Saxon England*, p. 578; Ian Walker, *Harold: The Last Anglo-Saxon King* (Stroud, 1997) [hereafter Walker, *Harold*], p. 92; Barlow, *The Godwins*, p. 97.

⁴ *The Life of King Edward who Rests at Westminster, Attributed to a Monk of St. Bertin*, ed. Frank Barlow (2nd edn., Oxford, 1992) [hereafter *Vita Ædwardi*], p. 51, n. 124, and Frank Barlow, *Edward the Confessor* (1970) [hereafter Barlow, *Edward*], pp. 226–8.

⁵ David Douglas, *William the Conqueror: The Norman Impact upon England* (1964), p. 175; Mason, *House of Godwine*, pp. 83, 92, 111 and 121.

⁶ Barlow, *Edward*, p. 227; Walker, *Harold*, pp. 102 and 199; Mason, *House of Godwine*, p. 121.

portrayed on the Bayeux Tapestry. Can the information from these sources, friendly and hostile, be combined?

In 1065 a monk or clerk from Saint-Omer⁷ wrote the first portion of the work later known as the *Vita Ædwardi*. Originally this *Vita* was intended as an ode to Queen Edith and her family. The author is well-informed and has direct knowledge of recent events in England, possibly as an eyewitness. He writes of Edith's brothers, Harold and Tostig, in a balanced way and he avoids referring to their discord for as long as possible. When one brother is praised, he feels compelled to praise the other. Tostig's experiences in Rome during 1061 are discussed at length, so it was obviously necessary for him that Harold should go to Rome as well. Harold's pilgrimage, however, is not confirmed by other reliable sources.⁸ The author devotes a meagre thirteen lines to this expedition – but what lines they are! According to Edward Freeman 'the passage is most obscure, no doubt purposely obscure.'⁹ In fact, these lines mostly concern Harold's travel through France en route to Rome and his return to England. Only two lines describe his stay in Rome, seeking relics of the apostles. It is an oddly incoherent journey. In France, Harold made a study of the character, the politics and the authority of the French territorial princes as well as of the French customs – certainly not the most relevant preparation for a pilgrimage. The earl made notes of everything of interest that he saw and heard there. He did not just leave the task of scrutiny to those who served him, but carried out personal investigation as well, in which he left nothing to chance. Harold observed what he could obtain from these princes, states the author in this passage laced with synonyms, 'inquisitive, astute and cunning, with natural ingenuity, resoluteness and at length, as was his habit'. This custom would serve him well if he needed these persons 'in the management of any particular interest'. By this scheme, the author continues, Harold 'acquired such an exhaustive knowledge about these princes, that he could not be deceived by any of their proposals'.¹⁰ And once he had properly studied the French customs, he could proceed even more alertly during the remainder of his journey to Rome. Even more improbable is the author's report of a near-accident. The single sentence about this misfortune is both revealing and meaningless: Harold succeeded in coming home 'with watchful mockery' – alertness and derision – through all ambushes, as was his way.¹¹

Lack of confirmation from other sources and an inconceivable combination of a pilgrimage with lengthy, in-depth intelligence gathering provide sufficient reason to doubt the occurrence of the Rome-journey.

⁷ *Vita Ædwardi*, p. xlvii.

⁸ *Vita Ædwardi*, p. 52, n. 125.

⁹ Quoted in *Vita Ædwardi*, p. 33, nn. 3 and 4. According to Freeman, Harold made his expedition to Rome in 1058 to obtain diplomatic support of the French king and the count of Anjou against a threatening Norman invasion.

¹⁰ *Vita Ædwardi*, p. 50: 'At ille . . . administratione . . . Adeo . . . posset.'

¹¹ *Vita Ædwardi*, pp. 50–2: 'Attentius . . . ad propria.'

It remains possible, as Philip Grierson suggested, that the two lines concerning the pilgrimage do pertain to the year 1057, when Harold was present in Saint-Omer to subscribe a charter.¹² Is it allowed to link the remaining eleven lines to the Channel-crossing of 1064? The author demonstrates in a later passage that he is well-informed about this journey. When he delves into the painful subject of Harold's and Tostig's internecine struggle, which came to a confrontational head in November 1065, while he was still at work on the text, he points out Harold's possible involvement in a rebellion against Tostig's authority. When Tostig openly accused his elder brother of being a traitor, Harold felt obliged to declare his innocence under oath. The author adds that Harold's word has little value, however, because he simply took an oath too lightly.¹³ It is generally assumed that the anonymous author refers here to the oath that Harold took a short time earlier in France – an oath well known from the Bayeux Tapestry. He uses the episode involving this oath to express his disapproval of Harold's intrigues against Tostig, who was obviously the favourite of his patron, Queen Edith. It is a thinly disguised accusation. Is this the only place in the *Vita Ædwardi* where the author in reality discusses the 1064 expedition?

Immediately following his crossing of the Channel in 1064, Harold and his companions were arrested by Guy, count of Ponthieu. The capture is depicted on the Tapestry with many details. According to the artist, Harold was treated with respect. He was allowed to keep his falcons and his sword was returned to him. When William, duke of Normandy, learned of Harold's presence in Ponthieu, he took immediate action. He sent two couriers to Guy's palace in Beaurain. On the Tapestry they are depicted as tall and intimidating soldiers. They convinced Guy to surrender his prisoner. This was certainly not a case of voluntary transfer but rather one of coercion. William thereby gained custody of a political opponent, who had suddenly and fortuitously appeared on the French coast: Harold, son of Godwine of Wessex, the earl who during the English succession crisis of 1051 had stood in the way of the advance of Norman interests in England.

According to William of Poitiers, archdeacon of Lisieux, who wrote his *Gesta Guillelmi Ducis Normannorum* around 1075, Harold owed his freedom to the persuasive powers of Duke William, who got him out of prison 'by a mixture of prayers and threats'. The transfer took place at Eu, on the border with Normandy. The duke 'escorted Harold most honourably' to Rouen, where he offered 'him every kind of hospitality . . .

¹² Philip Grierson, 'A Visit of Earl Harold to Flanders in 1056', *English Historical Review*, li (1936) [hereafter Grierson, 'Visit to Flanders'], 90–7. Sten Körner, *The Battle of Hastings: England and Europe 1035–1066* (Lund, 1964) [hereafter Körner, *Battle of Hastings*], p. 214, asserts that the destination of Rome fits better with the Tapestry-expedition of 1064, which was intended to strengthen ties between England and the continent. See Barlow, *Edward*, p. 217; Barlow, *The Godwins*, p. 82; and Mason, *House of Godwine*, p. 91.

¹³ *Vita Ædwardi*, p. 80: '... sed ille citius . . . purgavit'.

He congratulated himself warmly, on having so great a guest.' Conversely, Poitiers emphasizes Guy's ill nature. In his telling, the count is a man who makes a habit of robbing shipwrecked victims. Men like him lay ambushes for rich and powerful people. Their prisoners are tortured and only released once they are close to death, usually after payment of a large ransom.¹⁴

The word that Poitiers uses for Guy's dishonourable activities is 'illaquere' – the laying of ambushes. His statement is diametrically opposed to a phrase used by the author of the *Vita Edwardi*: Harold is adept at avoiding 'insidiae' – ambushes. The resemblance between these two expressions is striking. How to explain this clash? And which author, then, is speaking the truth: William of Poitiers, who claims that Harold walked into an ambush, or the anonymous monk, who asserts that Harold was so smart that he would never be surprised by an ambush? The answer is clear. Poitiers's vision is not only confirmed by the Tapestry's artist but also by the twelfth-century historian Eadmer of Canterbury, who asserts that Harold fell into Guy's hands and that William subsequently coerced the count to release his prisoner. But this does not automatically imply that the author of the *Vita* is telling lies. Harold's journey, for whatever reason it was made, was a complete failure. It began with his imprisonment in Ponthieu and ended with his being compelled to take an oath in Normandy. His custody was even more than a misfortune; it was the result of a downright blunder. After all, why or for what purpose did he land in Ponthieu? Contemporary sources mention nothing about his intended destination. The Bayeux Tapestry shows Harold's galley making the crossing 'velis vento plenis' – most likely indicating a favourable wind. The embroidery provides a very detailed description of his preparations and his crossing, in the style of an eyewitness account; nonetheless, there is not the slightest indication of damage to his ship. William of Jumièges reports nothing other than that Harold was 'carried along with the wind'. The word 'shipwreck' appears for the first time in William of Poitiers's *Gesta*, but in a difficult-to-grasp, ambiguous context:

Harold, after escaping the dangers of the crossing as he sailed to undertake his mission, landed on the coast of Ponthieu, where he fell into the hands of Count Guy. He and his men were seized and taken into custody; a misfortune that a man as proud as he would gladly have exchanged for shipwreck.¹⁵

A so-called shipwreck could be a mere excuse. Was Harold's galley really washed ashore? Twelfth-century writers adopt Poitiers's story indiscriminately – a classic case of repetition and exaggeration.¹⁶ Eadmer of Canterbury says that a storm frightened the sailors on board and that

¹⁴ *Gesta Guillelmi*, pp. 68–9: 'precatu . . . extortum . . .'; pp. 70–1: 'Heraldum . . . hospite . . .'; pp. 68–9: 'Illaquant . . . tormentis'.

¹⁵ *The Gesta Guillelmi of William of Poitiers*, ed. R. H. C. Davis and M. Chibnall (Oxford, 1998) [hereafter *Gesta Guillelmi*], pp. 68–9: 'Heraldus . . . mutaret.'

¹⁶ Körner, *Battle of Hastings*, p. 119.

the ship drifted towards the coast of Ponthieu. William of Malmesbury eventually points to this storm as the cause of Harold's stranding – possibly to exonerate him of guilt for the fateful outcome of the journey.¹⁷

As early as 1160 Wace casts doubt on the background of this incident in his *Roman de Rou*. In his usual reflective writing style he poses questions about the travel objectives reported by earlier writers – either the taking of an oath to William or an attempt to free two hostages – as well as the cause of the unfortunate course of Harold's journey:

Whatever business he was pursuing and whatever he intended to do, Harold set out, no matter how things would turn out for him; an event which has to take place cannot be prevented, and something which has to happen cannot fail to do so for any reasons . . . I cannot tell you what mistake he made, either concerning the helmsman or the crosswind, but I know he went astray. He did not manage to enter Normandy and had to sail to the Ponthieu; he was unable to turn back and could not conceal his arrival there.¹⁸

Wace suggests the possibility that Harold and his sailors were incompetent. Indeed, Harold's landing in this county seems not to be the result of fog, shipwreck or any other accident. His imprisonment might be the result of an error of navigation or – more likely – a miscalculation. Harold had embarked at Bosham. Eleventh-century travellers normally took the shortest Channel-crossing, from Dover to Wissant. Saint-Omer in Artois, a county in the sphere of influence of Flanders, was a common destination.¹⁹ Harold was compelled, however, to avoid the ports of Wissant and Boulogne-sur-Mer, located in the county of Eustace II of Boulogne – an outright opponent, even an enemy of his family.²⁰ The estuary of the Somme, with the harbours of Le Crotoy and Saint-Valery-sur-Somme, a *seigneurie* in the county of Ponthieu,²¹ was a safer landing-place for a Godwineson. So, travelling the road via Ponthieu to Saint-Omer was a better option than taking the principal road through the county of

¹⁷ Eadmer's *History of Recent Events in England* (*Historia Novorum in Anglia*), trans. G. Bosanquet (1964) [hereafter *Eadmer's History of Recent Events*]; 'Mare . . . exagivat'; William of Malmesbury, *Gesta Regum Anglorum: The History of the English Kings*, i, ed. and trans. R. A. B. Mynors, completed by R. M. Thomson and M. Winterbottom (Oxford, 1998) [hereafter *Gesta Regum Anglorum*], 'sed, subito . . . compellitur' – citations compared by Körner, *Battle of Hastings*, p. 119.

¹⁸ Glyn S. Burgess, *The History of the Norman People, Wace's Roman de Rou* (Woodbridge, 2004), p. 154 (ll. 5605–52).

¹⁹ Frank Barlow, *The English Church 1000–1066* (1963), pp. 14–15; Mark Gardiner, 'Shipping and Trade between England and the Continent during the Eleventh Century', *Anglo-Norman Studies*, xxii (1999), 71–93, at 76.

²⁰ King Edward promoted an alliance with Arques, Picardy and Boulogne, whereas the Godwines favoured a pact with Flanders, see Heather J. Tanner, *Families, Friends and Allies: Boulogne and Politics in Northern France and England, c.879–1160* (Leiden, 2004), p. 91; N. J. Higham, 'Harold Godwineson: The Construction of Kingship' [hereafter Higham, 'Harold Godwineson'], in *King Harold II and the Bayeux Tapestry*, ed. Gale R. Owen-Crocker, (Woodbridge, 2005), p. 26; and Frank McLynn, *1066: The Year of the Three Battles* (1998) [hereafter McLynn, *1066*], p. 16.

²¹ Genealogical websites mention Wigbert or Walter (French: Gilbert or Gauthier) and his son (?) Bernard as *seigneurs* of Saint-Valery c.1064.

Boulogne. Harold's galley might have gone adrift or his lookout might have failed to spot the bay of the Somme. He might have landed in the Marquentaire, on the sandy beaches between the rivers Somme, Authie and, further north, the Canche – illustrated on the Bayeux Tapestry.

Whatever happened, however, Harold's choice of this roundabout route certainly was a mistake. The earl misjudged the political situation in Ponthieu. He failed to remember that in 1056 Count Guy had been forced to pay tribute and swear fealty to William of Normandy. As of that year, Ponthieu became a vassal state. This all occurred shortly before Harold and Guy met one another in November 1056, on the occasion of the signing of a charter issued in Saint-Omer.²² Harold should have realized that Duke William could force Guy to hand him over at the first opportunity. A blunder indeed: embarrassing for a 'uir adeo magnus'.²³ Harold had a reputation, 'nominis et fame',²⁴ as an expert in the ways of French politics. Bard McNulty understands an aspect of human nature when he concludes: 'It may be that Harold did what other men in public life have done before and since in embarrassing situations, put out false reports of what happened.'²⁵ Harold may have placed the blame for the error of navigation on his helmsman or lookout. Or he may have been covering for his crew's blunder by telling of a storm that surprised the ship. The anonymous author, William of Poitiers, and even Wace a century later, all refer, whether deliberately or not, to Harold's own whitewashing of events after his return home.

Of course, the author of the *Vita* was not independent in his writing and there is no certainty as to whether he actually revealed all that he knew. This monk was not the only writer in England who records stories about Harold's stealthy crossing. In the twelfth century more details became known. Eadmer of Canterbury mentions in his *Historia Novorum* an alternative objective, namely an attempt to free two family members taken hostage by Duke William – a noble, but dangerous, naive undertaking and therefore also highly unlikely. At approximately the same time, William of Malmesbury speaks of a fishing trip on the Channel – a sophism that deserves no answer, unless taken as 'fishing for information'.²⁶ In Scandinavia another version of Harold's destination was current and states that the earl was sailing for Wales but was diverted by bad weather to Normandy.²⁷ The variety of explanations is remarkable. Rumours about Harold's crossing must have spread like wildfire. It is arguable that these contemporary stories permeated the later chronicles.

²² Grierson, 'Visit to Flanders', p. 90.

²³ *Gesta Guillelmi*, pp. 68–9. Poitiers uses this characterization in connection with Harold's landfall in Ponthieu.

²⁴ *Vita Ædwardi*, p. 52.

²⁵ J. Bard McNulty, *The Narrative Art of the Bayeux Tapestry Master* (New York, 1989), p. 6.

²⁶ *Gesta Regum Anglorum*, pp. 279–80; McLynn, 1066, pp. 158–9. The constellation *Duo Pisces* appears twice on the Bayeux Tapestry.

²⁷ *King Harold's Saga*, cap. 76, cited in Barlow, *The Godwins*, pp. 104–5.

In effect, Harold's journey was a disaster. He found himself in a perilous situation, but was able to escape by means of a compromising act of allegiance. In the *Vita Ædwardi* Harold's adventures are recorded in a converse manner. The earl was capable of breaking through ambushes ('insidiantes . . . peruenit'), while in reality he was ensnared; he is an authority on French politics ('nominis et fame'), while he actually miscalculated the safety of Ponthieu; he could not be deceived ('nulla . . . falli posset'), while he was in fact worked into a corner in Bayeux. The pilgrimage to Rome cannot be dated with certainty, but *if* this journey ever was made, a probable year might be 1057. The eleven lines from the *Vita* concerning Harold's diplomatic activities and his dangerous journey through France actually talk about the year 1064.

So, Frank Barlow was correct: the *Vita Ædwardi* contains a 'covert reference'. The suggestion has serious implications for the nature of Harold's crossing. The curious report reveals Harold's embarrassment. The verbal swaggering was meant to veil the reality of his disgraceful captivity. It is highly unlikely, moreover, that the English magnates accepted with gratitude the irrevocable fact of Harold's commitment to a foreigner. It is therefore understandable that Harold wanted to cover up, trivialize or at least explain away the inglorious drama in Bayeux and his extorted oath. For the home front, he created the appearance that, despite all the dangers, he nonetheless managed to return safely – quite a story indeed! His boasting is echoed in the *Vita* – the eulogy, after all, extolling the talents of the two brothers. Harold would never allow himself to be surprised by the French rulers, as talented as he was in always returning home safely. The anonymous author describes Harold's voyage as a rather innocent pilgrimage to Rome – of course, this destination could be another fabrication of Harold himself. The cryptic character of this report indicates that the journey had a drawback. It was better for Harold to hush up all rumours. Apparently the real nature of his mission would evoke suspicion. This earl may have had something to hide in his own country concerning his ambitions.

The accident suffered by Harold in France was not limited to the misfortune on the coast of Ponthieu. William of Poitiers states that Harold was treated respectfully in Normandy. In reality, it is unlikely that he was treated so hospitably. As a result of his handing-over in Eu, his chances of a speedy, safe return to England declined to almost nil. Duke William was known as a merciless man, who had no reason to show the slightest sign of friendship to Harold, whose father had reduced the influence of the Normans at the court of King Edward. The only way to escape from imprisonment was to provide proof of his loyalty and trustworthiness. Naturally, William put him under great pressure to take his oath. Perjury was not particularly uncommon.²⁸ Upon his return to England, Harold

²⁸ Pauline Stafford, *Unification and Conquest* (1989) [hereafter Stafford, *Unification*], p. 97; Brian Golding, *Conquest and Colonisation* (Basingstoke, 1994) [hereafter Golding, *Conquest*], p. 25; Higham, 'Harold Godwinsson', p. 20.

had sufficient reason to allege that his promise was coerced and therefore invalid. In retrospect, William could have foreseen Harold's argument. Therefore, the question is not so much why Harold took this oath, but why his opponent was persuaded to be satisfied with it. Why did William let the Englishman return?

The answer is that for the Normans the oath seemed not to be purely the product of intimidation. Harold was in need of a good story in order to regain his freedom. Harold, however, *had* a good story in mind. The author of the *Vita Ædwardi* describes his secretive, shrewd character. Harold and his brother Tostig 'at times so cleverly disguised their intentions that one who did not know them was in doubt what to think'. He was a 'cautus derisor': a vigilant mocker, who was able to 'simulare'²⁹ and knew French politics like the back of his hand. He certainly was acquainted with the rumours about Duke William's visit in 1051 to King Edward – a Channel-crossing as mysterious as Harold's own expedition thirteen years later. Edward possibly 'under feng'³⁰ his Norman visitor and he may have used the opportunity to name him as his successor – the king was rather loose-lipped and diplomatic promises were cheap in these days.³¹ According to William of Poitiers, the English magnates, including Earl Godwine but excluding his son Harold, confirmed this promise 'with a handfast oath'.³² If this promise was ever made and if this oath was ever taken, Harold now without doubt took advantage of them.

Furthermore, Harold was most probably acquainted with the outcome of a mission to Normandy many years before his own embassy, when Duke William received the expelled archbishop of Canterbury, the Norman Robert Champart – once the political adviser of the young Edward and in 1051 opponent of the Godwines. The archbishop provoked a political crisis, in which Godwine first lost and then later regained his predominant position in English politics. In September 1052, with the returning Godwine and his men *ante portas* of London, Robert panicked. He rashly snatched – actually kidnapped – Hakon and Wulfnoth, the two hostages that Godwine gave to King Edward in 1051, went on board 'an unsteady ship and travelled right on across the sea, and abandoned

²⁹ *Vita Ædwardi*, p. 50: 'Vterque . . . pot[u]lerit'; p. 52: '. . . per medios . . . propria.'

³⁰ John, 'Edward the Confessor', 254–5; *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicles*, ed. and trans. Michael Swanton (2000) [hereafter *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicles*], Worcester Manuscript (D), 1052 [1051], p. 176. Much has been written about this visit by historians. Their arguments about the 1064 journey overlap: believers in William's visit often interpret Harold's Channel-crossing as a mission in the name of Edward. Most modern historians reject the possibility that Edward in 1051 nominated William as his heir, but rejecting the possibility of a promise is not equal to denying the latent Norman ambitions – the relevant issue for this article.

³¹ Barlow, *Edward*, p. 109; Barlow, *The Godwines*, p. 105: Edward was 'notoriously fickle'. On the *post obitum* grant, see John S. Beckerman, 'Succession in Normandy, 1087, and in England, 1066: The Role of Testamentary Custom', *Speculum*, xxxvii (1972), 258–60, and Emily Z. Tabuteau, *Transfers of Property in Eleventh Century Norman Law* (Chapel Hill, 1988), pp. 24–7.

³² *Gesta Guillelmi*, pp. 120–1: 'iureiurando . . . confirmauerunt.'

his pallium and all Christendom here in the land', writes an Anglo-Saxon scribe.³³ To regain his pallium and to bring down the Godwines, Robert brought these hostages to Normandy, far out of reach of them. Upon this occasion the shrewd archbishop may have invented the story, largely upon his own initiative,³⁴ that he was sent by King Edward to promise the succession to the Norman duke. The two hostages were a so-called guarantee for William's right on the throne.³⁵ Robert's proclamation was a fabrication, or at least an exaggeration, born of necessity, but made with conviction and welcome to Norman ears.

Harold certainly was informed about the archbishop's manoeuvres. This unfortunate traveller now made optimal use of this knowledge. Robert's invention may have been forgotten in Rouen, but Harold knew how to manipulate slumbering ambitions. He revived these memories by stating that he had come under orders of King Edward – not simply to take an oath, but stronger still, to emphasize a promise by means of an 'handfast oath' he had not yet taken in 1051. Harold let William hear what he *wanted* to hear. An expedition in the name of the ageing king, to confirm this thirteen-year-old nomination – this story certainly was believable. For the ambitious duke, Harold was just a second visitor who claimed to speak about the designation.

To conceal the true purpose of his presence on the continent, Harold certainly raised other matters, such as the captivity of his brother Wulfnoth and his nephew Hakon. He did this so convincingly that William even released one of his hostages.³⁶ The earl probably tried to affirm his trustworthiness by connecting their release with a marriage proposal – a frequently used peace-weaving mechanism, just as the exchange of hostages.³⁷ The name of the initiator is unknown. Even the names of the involved candidates are uncertain. The enigmatic scene of Aelfgyva on the Bayeux Tapestry might be a reference to Harold's excuses to avoid an unwelcome betrothal to William's daughter Adelida – an alliance with Mercia suited him better.³⁸ According to Eadmer of Canterbury, Harold promised his own sister to a Norman nobleman. When two years later, in 1066, a Norman messenger came to claim this betrothed sister, Harold – this genuine 'derisor' – scoffed at the envoy and without doubt outraged his master.³⁹

³³ *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicles*, E manuscript, 1053, p. 183.

³⁴ Walker, *Harold*, p. 47; Mason, *House of Godwine*, pp. 77–8 and 110, gives the most plausible chronology of events around this kidnapping.

³⁵ *Gesta Guillelmi*, pp. 68–9: 'cuius . . . eadem'.

³⁶ *Gesta Guillelmi*, pp. 76–7: 'Qui etiam . . . redditus est'.

³⁷ R. Lavelle, 'The Use and Abuse of Hostages in Later Anglo-Saxon England', *Early Medieval Europe* xiv (2006), 269–96.

³⁸ Ad van Kempen, *Uitweg uit Normandië, Reisverslag, Belofte en Woordbreuk op het Tapijt van Bayeux* (Alphen aan de Maas, 2007) [hereafter Van Kempen, *Uitweg*], pp. 102–16; Adelida: E. van Houts, 'The Echo of the Conquest in the Latin Sources: Duchess Mathilda, her Daughters and the Enigma of the Golden Child', in *The Bayeux Tapestry: Embroidering the Facts of History*, ed. P. Bouet, B. Levy and Fr. Neveux (Caen, 2004), pp. 141–2.

³⁹ *Eadmer's History of Recent Events*, p. 8.

A last element of Harold's credibility is formed by the simple fact that he arrived in Normandy at an opportune moment. In 1062 William managed to get his hands free to launch an expansionist policy. His first victim was Maine, his second was Brittany – as depicted on the Bayeux Tapestry. In the meantime Harold disembarked. For the duke, Harold's arrival truly was an unexpected gift from God. For Harold, it was the right moment, because he was able to stir up William's latent ambitions – for England, of course, the moment had dramatic consequences.

So, Harold convinced the Normans that his oath was not taken under duress, but was part of a diplomatic mission in the name of King Edward.⁴⁰ Indeed, this earl was smart enough. He saved himself through a combination of bluffs, fabrications and perjury. The duke released his prisoner, together with his hostage Hakon. William of Poitiers records his gullibility in the *Gesta* as an act of generosity.⁴¹ Even after Harold ascended to the throne of the English – thus after his oath was confirmed as a fraud – the archdeacon of Lisieux seems to persist in his acceptance of the fabrication. He states that King Edward made Harold his ambassador to William due to his prominent position among the English nobility. In this argument it can be seen how skilful Harold was in constructing his masquerade. And when Poitiers asserts that William received his guest with open arms because the duke hoped to use him as a trusted mediator between himself and his future English subjects,⁴² he records illusions stirred up by Harold himself.

In reality, the Normans were not impressed by Harold's tales. William may have been greedy or even naive, but his advisers, such as the Italian scholar Lanfranc of Bec,⁴³ responded adequately to Harold's lies. Propagandists adopted his own pretexts and even embroidered his tales – for their own propagandistic ends, to gain the support of European sovereigns and of Pope Alexander II for the righteousness of William's claims. The *Gesta Guillelmi* fits in with this counter-propaganda, showing Harold's perfidious behaviour. But when Poitiers records Harold's lies, he cannot resist demonstrating, between the lines, that he is aware of the true nature of Harold's journey – although it was easy for him to say so, ten years after the fact. Several sentences in his *Gesta* are very similar to the passage from the *Vita Edwardi* discussed above. According to the *Vita*, Harold collected his intelligence not only in person but also through those who served him. Poitiers also mentions activities of 'spies whom he had cunningly suborned across the sea'. One of these spies was

⁴⁰ Mason, *House of Godwine*, p. 114, comes close to this insight: 'Its [the oath] claim to validity could only be upheld by insisting that King Edward had sent the earl on his mission.' Unfortunately Mason does not go on to discuss the consequences of her suggestion.

⁴¹ *Gesta Guillelmi*, pp. 76–7: 'donis onustum omisit; . . .'.

⁴² *Gesta Guillelmi*, pp. 70–1: 'amici . . . fidissimum'.

⁴³ George Garnett, 'Coronation and Propaganda: Some Implications of the Norman Claim to the Throne of England in 1066', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, xxxvi (1986), 91–116, at p. 110.

unmasked. This person ‘tried to conceal the purpose of his journey with the pretext he had been taught’ – a similarity to Harold’s behaviour in 1064. The arrest caused unrest among the Norman people. William played down the incident, but had to admit that Harold had no lack of gold and silver that he could use to buy the loyalty and skill of many people. The duke exhibited his magnanimity and granted the spy his freedom – another resemblance to the events of 1064, when William allowed his prisoner to return home. This story of daring could not quell the doubts of some of the nobles. The military operation would exceed the strength of the duchy, some felt. Others despaired as a result of Harold’s wealth. They had heard that the earl possessed a treasure chest large enough ‘to tempt dukes and powerful kings to join his side’.⁴⁴ The exact meaning of the last sentence cited is particularly obscure, but the comparison with the *Vita* is enlightening. The espionage and the diplomatic corruption from the *Gesta* are parallel to the activities mentioned in the *Vita*: obtaining information about the French leaders, in case Harold needed their assistance for the promotion of his interests.⁴⁵ Poitiers was, indeed, well informed. This Norman chronicler knew more than he could trust to his parchment about the true nature of Harold’s mission, because in doing so he would implicitly accuse Duke William of imprudence, even naivety, instead of praising him for his cool-headedness and nobility.

With these insights there is suddenly more information about Harold’s expedition of 1064 than was previously available. Harold’s bragging not only reveals his pride but also his political ambitions. The anonymous author and the archdeacon of Lisieux both fill the void in the knowledge concerning the real character of Harold’s journey represented on the Bayeux Tapestry. His Channel-crossing was neither a mission in Edward’s name – an embassy to a political opponent, detrimental to his own interests – nor a private undertaking to free hostages – a foolhardy attempt, inconsistent with his reputation as a shrewd person. His mission, as Frank Barlow and other historians have already suggested, but which none of them has sustained and supported, was intended as a tour of diplomacy, intelligence and bribery, in order to obtain support for a scheme of his own.⁴⁶

What, then, was the precise objective of his scheme, concealed from the home front? It is still impossible to provide proof, but the suspicion is now stronger than ever that the objective pertained to the throne itself – an obvious answer but one that has been nearly forgotten by modern

⁴⁴ *Gesta Guillelmi*, pp. 106–7: ‘Heraldus interea . . . conducantur’.

⁴⁵ *Vita Ædwardi*, p. 51, n. 124; Barlow, *Edward*, pp. 226–8; Golding, *Conquest*, p. 25, confirms the similarity, but no historian fully realizes the consequences of the overlap.

⁴⁶ Barlow, *Edward*, p. 228, recognizes this possibility, but ultimately prefers the story that Harold undertook his travel to free the hostages. If Harold went to France to get support for a scheme of his own, he continues, the following pilgrimage was meant to obtain absolution from engagements extorted from him – a mere guess, just as so many other explanations of his embassy.

historians.⁴⁷ Harold went to the continent on behalf of his own ambitions. His embassy of 1064 was a turning point in Anglo-Norman relations, but the question is: *whose* ambitions were boosted? According to Frank Barlow and other historians, the very fact that William was going to make a bid for the crown could have implanted or encouraged the same aspiration in Harold. A neutral view on the interaction between these men is more attractive: the unanticipated confrontation stirred up the ambitions of both rivals. Contemporary sources, however, do not support the assertion that after 1051 Norman interest in English affairs remained uninterrupted. There is no evidence that this aspiration played a part in William's diplomacy, warfare or long-term strategy. Therefore, the most plausible explanation for the heat of the forthcoming struggle between these men is a reversed causation: it was Harold and his prevarications that stimulated William's potential but dormant ambitions and, after January 1066, provoked his wrath.

The reversal throws new light on the decade before the Conquest. Harold certainly was neither a fool, packed off to Normandy, nor a dupe, who risked his life to save his relatives, but a cunning politician resolved on the kingship. From what year onwards did he aspire to the throne? Every attempt to fix the year ends in probabilities, not in an exact year. The *terminus ad quem* is January 1066. The *Vita Ædwardi* gives detailed information about the way Harold was designated as successor to the throne. King Edward proclaimed him at his deathbed in Westminster Palace *nutricius* – protector – of his widow Queen Edith and his kingdom, although his formula was obscure and his mental condition was highly unstable. The artist of the Bayeux Tapestry without doubt used the description of the deathbed scene in the *Vita*.⁴⁸ The fingers of Edward and Harold touch each other. So the Tapestry designer appears to confirm that in this palace the subject of the *designatio* was raised – the formal designation of Harold as his successor. On the other hand, there were only three witnesses. The outside world learned a highly subjective account of Edward's last words, given by an earl who at that moment was determined to grasp the throne – bequest or no bequest, designation or not.⁴⁹ The English magnates accepted Harold's – and Archbishop Stigand's – version of Edward's will, which was unverifiable but credible and fitting for the actual political problems in England.

⁴⁷ John, 'Edward the Confessor', 257–60, states that Harold already in 1057 had ambitions for the crown. His embassy to Normandy took place in the last month of 1065, after Tostig's fall, when King Edward wanted to humiliate him: 'Willing to wound . . . he forced Harold to go to William.' John's 'mission impossible' is spectacular but unlikely. A more credible reason why the earl obeyed his king is given by T. J. Oleson, 'Edward the Confessor's Promise of the Throne to Duke William', *English Historical Review*, lxxii (1957) [hereafter Oleson, 'Edward the Confessor's Promise'], 221–8, at p. 226, n. 3: if Harold would not fulfil this mission, his brother Tostig would. It must be admitted that in the end the burden of proof is too heavy for *any* impression.

⁴⁸ Barlow, *Edward*, p. 251; *Vita Ædwardi*, p. 116, n. 296.

⁴⁹ Barlow, *The Godwins*, p. 126; Barlow, *Edward*, p. 252.

The *terminus a quo* is 1056. In November of that year the earl went to Artois, maybe to Flanders in the name of King Edward, to search for a suitable heir to the throne. Bringing back a Hungarian émigré named Edward might be part of reconciliation between the childless king and the powerful Godwine family, to heal the wounds of the succession crisis of 1051–2. For King Edward this relative – son of his half-brother – was acceptable; the Godwines must have preferred this outsider above the ‘French’ candidates, Eustace of Boulogne and his stepsons Walter of Mantes and Ralph of Hereford, the ‘King’s nephew’.⁵⁰ At first, Harold acquiesced in the succession by this exile. After his sudden death, the earl seemed to be content with a position as the kingmaker of the exile’s son, the minor Edgar Ætheling, who would be the intended successor when he reached adulthood. The death of his father’s rival Earl Leofric of Mercia in September 1057 was an important step forward.⁵¹ For the first time Harold could think of mounting the throne himself, but his ambitions were unfathomable; his real scheme remained unspoken, even kept secret, at least until his return from Normandy in 1064.⁵²

Events in the Marches of England and Wales offer the key to understanding the course of events. From 1055 onwards it was Earl Leofric’s son Ælfgar who took the lead in the opposition against the supremacy of the Godwines. The unmanageable Ælfgar particularly opposed the promotion of Tostig to earl of Northumbria. His sudden death in 1062 was, as Stenton commented, ‘one of the determining events of the eleventh century’.⁵³ Ælfgar’s departure destabilized the political balance and provoked a sudden military action in Wales. Harold’s success was an impetus to his aspirations.⁵⁴ His raid resulted in a celebrated victory, but his most desired trophy was not the head of the Welsh King Gruffydd, delivered in person in August 1063 to King Edward, but an alliance with Edwin and Morcar, Earl Ælfgar’s minor sons.⁵⁵ This coalition was highly detrimental to Tostig’s interests, because, according to the author of the *Vita Edwardi*, ‘ill will from long-standing rivalry [reigned] between these

⁵⁰ Acceptable candidate: Golding, *Conquest*, p. 23. N. J. Higham, *The Death of Anglo-Saxon England* (Stroud, 1997) [hereafter Higham, *Death of Anglo-Saxon England*], p. 143, and R. Allen Brown, *The Normans and the Norman Conquest* (2nd edn., Woodbridge, 1985), p. 110, consider the exile as Harold’s candidate. After his death, Brown continues, Harold stood empty-handed. For this reason in 1064 he accepted his mission to William.

⁵¹ Godwine’s rival: Stafford, *Unification*, p. 93; Dramatic changes c.1056–9: Higham, ‘Harold Godwinsson’, p. 29. Both surveys on the succession crises have parallels with my analysis.

⁵² Genesis of Harold’s claim: Oleson, ‘Edward the Confessor’s Promise’, 225–7, confirmed by John, ‘Edward the Confessor’, 257; Stafford, *Unification*, p. 94; Higham, ‘Harold Godwinsson’, p. 21.

⁵³ Stenton, *Anglo-Saxon England*, p. 575.

⁵⁴ Kelly R. de Vries, ‘Harold Godwinson in Wales: Military Legitimacy in Late Anglo-Saxon England’, in R. P. Abels and B. S. Bachrach, *The Normans and their Adversaries at War* (Woodbridge, 2001), pp. 65–85, at p. 84.

⁵⁵ Higham, *Death of Anglo-Saxon England*, p. 147, did not notice the rift between the Godwinsons. More recently, in ‘Harold Godwinsson’, p. 31, he unmasked Harold’s cynical Mercian alliance – as has been shown in Van Kempen, *Uitweg*, p. 164. Higham underestimates the ancient roots of the brother’s rivalry and ignores the relation with Harold’s embassy to Flanders.

brothers of royal stock and Earl Tostig.⁵⁶ Harold's marriage with their sister Ealdgyth may have been foreseen or concluded in this year, though probably celebrated at a later date – if celebrated at all.

At the same time, the peace and quiet in England was threatened by the growing competition within the Godwine family itself. Harold and Tostig pursued their own interests. In addition, Queen Edith was claiming some regency over Edgar Ætheling,⁵⁷ using her brothers as her agents, perhaps even hoping to benefit by stoking the flame of rivalry into enmity.⁵⁸ According to the Anglo-Saxon Chronicles, the Welsh campaign of 1063 was a joint expedition of these brothers,⁵⁹ but it seems more realistic to suppose that Tostig's military assistance was meant to steal a march on his elder brother. The *Vita Ædwardi*, otherwise eager in praising any fraternal harmony, is remarkably silent about the campaign. For obscure reasons the author prefers to reserve this 'protracted and complicated' story for other historians⁶⁰ – a first rupture in the façade of harmony he established in his earlier lines. It is a broad hint. Tostig simply may have used the death of his opponent Ælfgar to settle an old score.

Several years before, in 1046–7, the Marches were the scene of discord within the Godwine family when Harold's elder brother Sven was insolently pursuing his own bid for glory. After Sven's banishment Harold opposed his rehabilitation.⁶¹ Sven died in 1052, but fraternal envy within this family remained stronger than harmony – as the writer of the *Vita* wants his readers to believe. Ailred of Rievaulx's apocryphal story about the wrestling match between Harold and Tostig, while they were still boys,⁶² may contain a grain of truth. The rivalry between these brothers may have grown as a result of Tostig's brilliant marriage in 1051 with Judith, sister of Count Baldwin V of Flanders. The author of the *Vita* mentions the existence of a 'voratrix' – a devouring monster – living within the Godwine family. There is no need to investigate the identity of this monster.⁶³ It can be plied as a metaphor to indicate that the real ailment was the continuous lack of unity. The hot-tempered Tostig failed to remember the force of the motto 'a family that slays together stays together'.⁶⁴ The

⁵⁶ *Vita Ædwardi*, p. 77: '... ducum Tostinum ... odia erant'.

⁵⁷ Pauline Stafford, *Queen Emma and Queen Edith: Queenship and Woman's Power in Eleventh-Century England* (Oxford, 1997), pp. 271–2.

⁵⁸ Barlow, *The Godwins*, p. 121; Barlow, in *Vita Ædwardi*, p. xxiv: 'Edith ... trying to manipulate her brothers'; Barlow, *Edward*, p. 299: 'If the brothers cancelled each other out, the sister was left pre-eminent'.

⁵⁹ *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicles*, Worcester Manuscript (D), 1063, p. 191.

⁶⁰ *Vita Ædwardi*, p. 64: 'Sed ... reseruamus ...'. De Vries, 'Harold Godwinson in Wales', p. 79, neglects the hint. According to Frank Barlow, *Vita Ædwardi*, p. 65, n. 161, the text is full of verbal conceits, and is involved and corrupt.

⁶¹ *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicles*, E Manuscript, 1046 [1049] and Abingdon Manuscript (C), 1049, p. 168.

⁶² *The Life of Saint Edward: King and Confessor, by blessed Ailred, Abbot of Rievaulx*, trans. J. Bertram (Guildford, 1990), pp. 87–8.

⁶³ Barlow, *The Godwins*, pp. 119–21; J. L. Grassi, 'The *Vita Ædwardi Regis*: The Hagiographer as Insider', *Anglo-Norman Studies*, xxvi (2003), 87–102, at pp. 94–5.

⁶⁴ John, 'Edward the Confessor', 259.

amount of envy in the mixture of ambitions that induced Harold to show his aspiration more openly is unknown. However, it might be assumed that after his successful campaign in Wales, Harold wanted nothing less than the crown of the English – if it could not be in harmony with his self-willed brother, then he would challenge him. At some point in 1063 Harold must have realized that Tostig, being at odds with the rulers of Mercia and, in his own earldom, with the native nobles of Bambergh and the Anglo-Scandinavian *thegns*, was a millstone, hampering his own ambitions.

The relation between the Welsh and Mercian events of 1062–3 and later political incidents – the murder of Gospatric the elder, the attack on a hunting lodge in Portskewett and the Northumbrian rebellion – is complicated but not obscure. Harold's Channel-crossing links them. Most probably, only a few months separate his diplomatic manoeuvres in Mercia from his next scheme, an embassy to Flanders – just as in 1056 – eventually to other principalities, but this time without the support of King Edward, most probably even unknown to him. The dogs, hawks and falcons on board his galley as seen on the Bayeux Tapestry were his diplomatic gifts – or they may refer to an invitation to a hunting party. Harold went to the mainland of Europe seeking the support of Count Baldwin V and eventually other rulers, perhaps asking Baldwin to put pressure on his brother-in-law Tostig, who accorded no respect for Harold's primogeniture.

This insight shows why it was so important for Harold to invent pretexts for the purpose of his Channel-crossing. Announcement of his private, sneaking undertaking would have certainly endangered his life during his imprisonment by Duke William. In his own country his ambition would arouse distrust among court circles around King Edward, Queen Edith and Earl Tostig. Their suspicion is reflected in the Bayeux Tapestry, in the scene showing Harold's return in London. His conduct is questioned by a suspicious king. Submissively, the earl bows his head. The artist clearly depicts him as a hunchback. Harold's deformation may symbolize his contrition or the burden he has placed upon himself and the English nation. The hunched back may even point to his secret agenda and his preceding manoeuvres in Mercia – very delicate and problematic, if they should become known. Harold's agreement with Edwin and Morcar, as it turned out, was nothing less than a *quid pro quo*: York for Ælfgar's minor sons, Ealdgyth and Westminster for Harold.

Until his landfall in Ponthieu Harold manoeuvred with caution. His scheme gained momentum by the unintentional, yet irrevocable exposure itself. Rumours about the expedition may have revealed his secret alliance. Eventually Tostig must have fully realized the content and consequences of this cynical agreement – highly treacherous, indeed, if the fraternal discord had not its long-standing roots. The younger earl was pressed into a corner by his brother. The revelation may have triggered Queen Edith's desperate action, the assassination of Gospatric in December 1064. According to the chronicler John of Worcester, she committed this

crime 'for love of her brother'.⁶⁵ Edith and Tostig may have had a part in an assault on Harold's fortification in Portskewett in August 1065 by the Welsh King Caradog ap Gruffydd. The Anglo-Saxon Chronicles hint at some underhand game: 'We do not know who first advised this folly.'⁶⁶ Obviously, the chronicler connects the raid with the revolt in Northumbria: 'And soon after this' the *thegns* rebelled against Earl Tostig. Harold may have paid his brother in his own coin, though the instigation of this revolt remains unproven. The *Vita Edwardi* is partial – the more Harold gains ascendancy over his brother, the more the author's patron, Queen Edith, chooses the side of her brother Tostig. Not openly but rather hypocritically, the author indicates that Harold may have fomented the uprising.⁶⁷

So Harold's expedition to Flanders was an ill-fated enterprise. After his unexpected and unwanted acquaintance with William of Normandy, there was no way back for him. His renewal of old, long-forgotten promises stirred up Norman expansionism. Harold was playing with fire and not fully aware of the dangers of his behaviour. He was a real 'derisor'. His sly excuses, his perjury and his mockery ridiculed and outraged the Norman duke. His way out of Normandy evokes memories of the flight of Paris from Sparta, carrying along in his wake the galleys of the deceived King Menelaus. Would William have made this military operation if Edgar Ætheling and not Harold Godwineson had sat on the English throne? This is a speculative but legitimate question, in view of the high costs and high risks of the invasion.⁶⁸ It seems unlikely that William would have invaded England without Harold's perjury, driven only by a claim originating from the vague promises of 1051–2 – thus without the personal confrontation between the rivals in 1064. Was the invasion a highly personal, impulsive action or the outcome of a long-term Norman policy? Indeed, the Conquest has elements of a punitive expedition. Further research into Norman military power, the logistics of warfare and William's redistribution of spoils is needed to decide whether the invasion was a safe and riskworthy operation or a hazardous adventure.

Eventually for Harold all was lost on the battlefield of Hastings. In the short run, however, his expedition of 1064 was successful in a strange way: it was a self-fulfilling enterprise. His promises and subterfuges succeeded

⁶⁵ R. R. Darlington and P. McGurk, *The Chronicle of John of Worcester*, ii: *The Annals from 450–1066* (Oxford, 1995), pp. 598–9.

⁶⁶ *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicles*, Worcester manuscript (D), 1065, p. 191. *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, ed. Dorothy Whitelock (1961), p. 137, translates: 'We do not know who first suggested this conspiracy.' Stephen Baxter, *The Earls of Mercia: Lordship and Power in Late Anglo-Saxon England* (Oxford, 2007), and idem, 'MS C of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle and the Politics of Mid-Eleventh-Century England', *English Historical Review* cxxii (2007), 1189–1227, were not available when this article was written.

⁶⁷ *Vita Edwardi*, pp. 78–80: 'Dicibatur . . . purgavit'. Most historians give Harold the benefit of the doubt. See for instance, Barlow, *Edward*, p. 239: Harold was calculating but not treacherous; Mason, *House of Godwine*, p. 130: a Machiavellian scheme was too risky for him; Higham, 'Harold Godwineson', p. 33, is convinced of the real character of the accusation.

⁶⁸ Walker, *Harold*, p. 41.

all too well. William's ambitions were boosted. Harold presented the English electing magnates with a *fait accompli*. England after 1064 needed a strong man on the throne, who would be able to resist a Norman invasion rather than a legitimate heir from the old Wessex dynasty, the young and inexperienced Edgar Ætheling – in the words of Frank Stenton: defence outweighed descent.⁶⁹

The *Vita Ædwardi* and the *Gesta Guillelmi* include some reminiscences of Harold's shadow play and William's power play in Ponthieu, Normandy and Brittany. Harold's journey appears as a tour of diplomacy, intelligence and bribery. Before William's throne in Rouen stood not a loyal, humble delegate, but an ambitious magnate, who had his sights set on the kingship and who shortly before had concluded a cunning deal with the sons of Ælfgar of Mercia – a Mercian connection, harmful to his brother Tostig. The visitor's fabrications about a state mission willy-nilly revived or stimulated William's latent interest in the English succession. Back in England, this chance encounter eventually revealed the true character of Harold's ambitions. The Channel-crossing itself formed the impetus for the Northumbrian revolt as well as for the Norman invasion of 1066.

⁶⁹ Stenton, *Anglo-Saxon England*, p. 577.