



2014-019

Marc Morris, *The Norman Conquest: The Battle of Hastings and the Fall of Anglo-Saxon England*. New York: Pegasus Books, 2013. Pp. 440. ISBN 978-1-60598-451-3.

Review by Bernard S. Bachrach, The University of Minnesota (bachr001@umn.edu).

In and around 1966, many conference proceedings, articles, and books were published in connection with the nine hundredth anniversary of the Norman Conquest. Many of the books were written by more or less well-informed amateurs for a popular audience. As the 950th anniversary approaches, we can expect another such outpouring of works for a general readership. Journalist Marc Morris has stolen a march in this race for popular attention.

*The Norman Conquest* is a superficially engaging and mostly reliable treatment of the political climate and the place of the aristocracy and the church in both pre- and post-Hastings England. However, the author demonstrates no command of the original sources in Latin and Anglo-Saxon—fundamental for philological analysis—or of non-Anglophone scholarship,<sup>1</sup> especially in regard to Normandy. The book's presentation of economic matters leaves much to be desired, specifically as they relate to military history, though the discussion of the Domesday Book is clear and useful.

While parts of the book can be recommended to nonspecialists, its discussions of military history in general cannot. Later Anglo-Saxon England was, in governmental and especially military terms, a Carolingian-type state.<sup>2</sup> Its military organization was tripartite in nature.<sup>3</sup> At the basic level was the great *fyrð* or General Levy<sup>4</sup> of all able-bodied men mobilized to defend their local areas when under attack. The second element, the select *fyrð* or Select Levy, required free landowners possessed of sufficient wealth (in terms of hides owned) to undertake offensive military operations even beyond their local areas. The third element comprised the military households of kings and magnates, who constituted the professional core of military forces of Anglo-Saxon England. Mercenaries served as temporary adjuncts to the military households who hired them. Morris's failure to clarify these basic distinctions is likely to mislead or confuse nonspecialist readers.

The military organization of Normandy in 1066 was a direct descendant of the institutional structures with which Charlemagne (d. 814) created the Carolingian empire. Its military, too, was tripartite and similar to that of the Anglo-Saxons. Morris asserts that "Feudalism, it seems, was arriving in Normandy with a vengeance" (51; see also 48, 145, 280, 323). But the entire "feudal construct" cannot be applied to military matters in medieval Europe.<sup>5</sup> Nor was Duke William's military influenced by his Viking ancestry. In fact, the second ruler of the Norman polity, William I (d. 942), had to learn Old Norse as a foreign language, and by the early eleventh century the Normans as a group had altogether abandoned their native language.<sup>6</sup>

Perhaps the most controversial subject in the study of medieval warfare is military demography. Without a grasp of the actual and potential orders of magnitude of armies, everything else of importance re-

1. Unfortunately, full documentation and the airing of scholarly controversies are not encouraged by publishers of popular books, even those intended for knowledgeable "buffs" like, e.g., the participants in Civil War Roundtables.

2. See James Campbell, *Essays in Anglo-Saxon History* (Ronceverte, WV: Hambledon Pr, 1986).

3. See C. Warren Hollister, *Anglo-Saxon Military Institutions on the Eve of the Norman Conquest* (1962; rpt. NY: Oxford U Pr, 1997), and *The Military Organization of Norman England* (Oxford: Clarendon Pr, 1965).

4. Which had no connection with the often discussed Free Germans described in a distorted manner by Tacitus (*Germania* 13-14) almost a millennium before the Norman Conquest. See Roberta Frank, "Germanic Legend in Old English Literature," in M. Godden and M. Lapidge, eds., *The Cambridge Companion to Old English Literature*, 2nd ed. (NY: Cambridge U Pr, 1997) 82-100; and Steven C. Fanning, "Tacitus, *Beowulf* and the Comitatus," *Haskins Soc. Journal* 9 (2001) 17-38.

5. See Susan Reynolds, *Fiefs and Vassals: The Medieval Evidence Reinterpreted* (NY: Oxford U Pr, 1994).

6. This is not as controversial as some scholars suggest: see, e.g., Leslie Abrams, "Early Normandy," *Anglo-Norman Studies* 35 (2013) 45-64.

mains obscure.<sup>7</sup> The size of the forces available to King Harold and Duke William remains controversial. “Minimalist” historians are mired in a swamp of Dark Age ignorance, while “maximalists” seek to apply the methods of *Sachkritik* (objective analysis) to correct for biases and lacunae in medieval sources written mostly by clerics more interested in points of theology than in military operations.<sup>8</sup> Morris takes a minimalist position in claiming William’s army “may have measured around 7,000 men.... [T]his was a consensus among Victorian scholars...” (152). However, said Victorian scholars, including Sir Charles Oman (who did not join the supposed consensus), were unacquainted with the Latin *Chronicle of St. Maixent* (ca. 1126–40), which provides the only feasible number for William’s army—fourteen thousand fighting men. Nor did they know that the chronicle’s patron was an heir of Viscount Aimery of Thouars, who not only played an important role in William’s army of conquest in 1066, but also married the duke’s sister. Morris rejects this text out of hand as “an obscure contemporary chronicle” (153) and makes no mention of Viscount Aimery.

Morris’s troubles with numbers are pervasive. True to the minimalism of his Victorian authorities, he accepts the “report” of John of Worcester (d. ca. 1140) that an enemy besieging force killed “more than 3,000 Normans” (227) in William’s “garrison” at York in 1069. Morris claims the various Scandinavian armies that invaded or threatened to invade England carried on average forty men in each of their ships. This means Scandinavian armies with three hundred ships transported some twelve thousand effectives. By the same calculus, the Norman invasion force of 1066, with at the very least six hundred ships (probably many more), could have carried twenty-four thousand men. William’s ships, however, were under sail and so could carry even more men than the Scandinavian galleys. Since William transported as many as three thousand highly trained war horses, Morris’s model yields an invasion force of perhaps twenty thousand men—fourteen thousand effectives and six thousand support personnel.<sup>9</sup>

The question of William’s horse transports raises another problem in Morris’s account. Unlike the Mediterranean region, Northern Europe before 1066 lacked the naval technology to transport large numbers of war horses in battle-ready (or any other) condition. By contrast, the Normans in southern Italy had learned from the Byzantines how to build horse transports, and the *Carmen de Hastingae Proelio* (“Song of the Battle of Hastings”), the earliest account of the Conquest, attests that Normans in fact came from the south to help William. They will have brought with them designs for horse transports. William the Conqueror’s son, the future King Henry I, employed a Norman from the south to captain his personal ship, and, before the end of the eleventh century, English kings commanded a fleet of horse transports capable of moving three thousand mounts back and forth across the Channel.<sup>10</sup> Morris nonetheless states that the northerners had horse transports *before* 1066, without citing any evidence, linguistic or otherwise, because there is none. He does not believe William received help from Norman Italy (373n30), despite the testimony of the *Carmen de Hastingae Proelio* and Baudri of Bourgueil that special horse transports were constructed.<sup>11</sup>

Morris’s treatment of the Battle of Hastings itself, besides failing to appreciate the size of the armies, relies too heavily on the Bayeux Tapestry and not enough on Baudri of Bourgueil’s famous poem dedicated to

7. See Bernard S. Bachrach, “Early Medieval Military Demography: Some Observations on the Methods of Hans Delbrück,” in *The Circle of War in the Middle Ages: Essays on Medieval Military and Naval History*, ed. Donald Kagay and L.J. Andrew Villalon (Rochester, NY: Boydell Pr, 1999) 3–20.

8. On Norman Conquest military demography, see Bernard S. Bachrach, “The Norman Conquest, Countess Adela, and Abbot Baudri,” *Anglo-Norman Studies* 35 (2013) 65–78.

9. In estimating the number of men in the Norman army, we must remember that William rewarded some five to seven thousand men who fought at Hastings with lands in England as per arrangements made during the period of mobilization. See J. H. Round, *Feudal England: Historical Studies on the Eleventh and Twelfth Centuries* (1898; rpt. Westport, CT: Greenwood Pr, 1979) 200–202; Austin Lane Poole, *Obligations of Society in the XII and XIII Centuries* (1948; rpt. Westport, CT: Greenwood Pr, 1984) 36; and R. Allen Brown, *Origins of English Feudalism* (NY: Barnes and Noble, 1973) 88.

10. See Bernard S. Bachrach, “On the Origins of William the Conqueror’s Horse Transports,” *Technology and Culture* 26 (1985) 505–31, rpt. in my *Warfare and Military Organization in Pre-Crusade Europe* (Burlington, VT: Variorum, 2002) 505–31.

11. Morris seems to confuse the meaning of the relevant Latin texts. In addition, he ignores Baudri’s poem; cf. my “William Rufus’ Plan to Invade Aquitaine,” in *The Normans and Their Adversaries: Studies in Honor of C. Warren Hollister*, ed. Richard Abels and Bernard S. Bachrach (Rochester, NY: Boydell Pr, 2001) 47–48; for a recent review of the importance of Baudri’s text, which adds significant detail to our understanding of the sequence of battle at Hastings, see Bachrach (note 8 above).

King William's daughter Adela of Blois.<sup>12</sup> Had Morris studied Baudri's text, he would have better understood the context of the first feigned retreat and its aftermath, as well as the unauthorized, failed attack on Harold's position, which caused panic along the entire line of the attacking forces. Baudri describes William as deployed at the rear of the army, following what was then understood as good Roman practice—a *dux* (commander) did not enter combat as a *miles* (soldier). But, Baudri continues, William, seeking to quell the developing panic, had to move to the front—at great risk to both himself and the entire invasion—to regain control and stabilize his lines.<sup>13</sup>

Other aspects of Morris's account of the Battle of Hastings are problematic as well, particularly regarding the Anglo-Saxon retreat; his treatment of William's many military operations from his march on London to the end of his reign is too sketchy to satisfy anyone interested in military history.<sup>14</sup> Morris provides nothing of value on William's or his adversaries' logistics.<sup>15</sup> He does rightly stress the primacy of sieges in post-Hastings warfare, but says little about how these were conducted or the size of the besieged *castella* (smaller forts), *castra* (fortified camps), and fortress cities. At least from the days of Alfred the Great (d. 899), the size of a fortification dictated the size of the garrison needed to defend it and of the besieging forces needed to capture it.<sup>16</sup>

William also ordered or licensed the construction or repair of fortifications throughout England. Morris ignores the strategic thinking that undergirded this effort and glosses over the operational and tactical aspects of William's many campaigns. He simply omits to discuss the strategy, tactics, and military technologies so vital to those who teach courses in military history. Since building, staffing, and supplying fortifications entailed costly investments, it is important as well to develop a nuanced understanding of the economics of warfare. Instead, Morris follows the clerical narratives that whine about high taxes and the vast destruction of life and property in William's wars. True, some of these complaints gain credence from a critical reading of the Domesday Book, but this approach sheds little light on the sources of massive surplus materials and human labor that went into the building or rebuilding of so many churches, including cathedrals, and fortifications.

The military history of the Middle Ages merits the same scholarly rigor and attention to detail as that of any other period.<sup>17</sup> Sadly, these are not to be found in Marc Morris's *The Norman Conquest*.

---

12. See Bernard S. Bachrach, "Some Observations on the Bayeux Tapestry," *Cithara* 27 (1987) 5–28, and note 8 above. Morris only twice calls attention to Baudri (179, 183) and then only as treated by other writers; it is not clear that he has even read the text, which does not appear in his bibliography.

13. See Bachrach (note 8 above) 75–76.

14. Francis Baring provides a useful start in trying to understand William's logistics, especially regarding the march from Hastings to London, in "The Conqueror's Footsteps in Domesday," *English Historical Review* 13 (1898) 17–25. Morris's claim that Baring's argument has been "discredited, not least because even its staunchest advocates are unable to agree on the same conclusion" (194–95) is unpersuasive. In addition, there has been no attempt to thoroughly examine the evidence by the methods of *Sachkritik*.

15. With regard to William's logistics prior to the invasion, see Bernard S. Bachrach, "Some Observations on the Military Administration of the Norman Conquest," *Anglo-Norman Studies* 8 (1986) 1–25, rpt. in Bachrach, *Warfare* (note 10 above) 1–25.

16. See Bernard S. Bachrach and Rutherford Aris, "Military Technology and Garrison Organization: Some Observations on Anglo-Saxon Military Thinking in Light of the Burghal Hidage," *Technology and Culture* 31 (1990) 1–17, rpt. in Bachrach, *Warfare* (note 10 above) 1–17.

17. If a 750-page work of original scholarship can be devoted to a single decade of Carolingian military history (see my *Charlemagne's Early Campaigns (768–777): A Strategic and Military Analysis* [Boston: Brill, 2013]), how much more may be said about William the Conqueror's campaigns over some four decades?