Kings And Coins In Medieval England

William I (1066-1087)

For the mangled bodies that had been the flower of the English nobility and youth covered the ground as far as the eye could see.

Orderic Vitalis (1075-c.1142), **Historia Ecclesiastica**

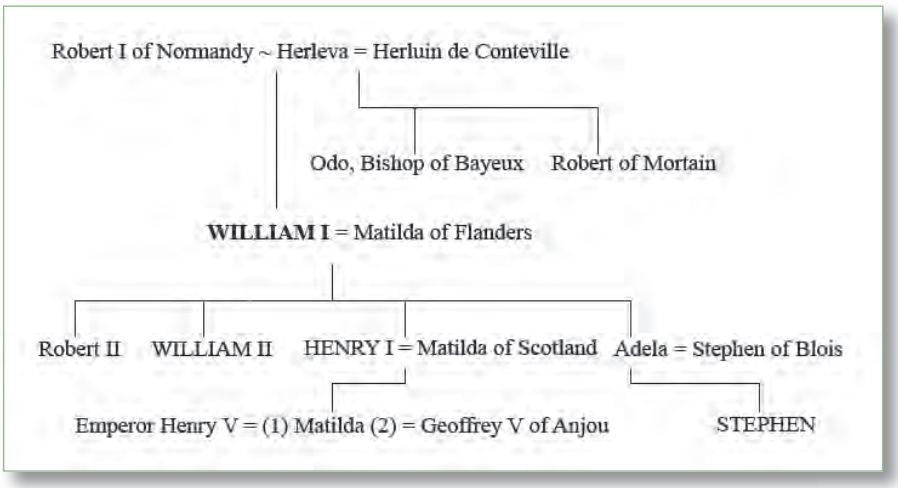


Fig.1. Genealogical table of the Norman kings of England.

Fig.2. Remains of the 3rd century west gate at the Saxon shore fort at Pevensey, East Sussex. © Richard Kelleher.

Introduction

The first Norman king of England was known by a variety of names: in non-Norman sources he was "the Bastard" due to his illegitimacy; to his subjects in north-western France he was the Duke of Normandy while to the Anglo-Saxons (and countless schoolchildren) he was "the Conqueror", victorious at the Battle of Hastings and subsequent claimant of the English throne. This first in a series of articles on the kings of England and their coins focuses on the first post-Conquest ruler, looking at his background and exploits, and assessing his impact on the coinage.

Background

William was born at the castle at Falaise in Normandy, probably in 1028, to Robert I, Duke of Normandy and Herleva, likely to have been a low-born daughter of a tanner and a member of the Duke's household. In 1035 Robert died at Nicea (modern Turkey) while returning from pilgrimage to Jerusalem and the eight or nine year old William became Duke. William's youth and illegitimacy made the early years of his dukedom challenging, with warfare and invasion from competing nobles a constant threat; but he was certainly up to the challenge and proved himself a remarkably skilled military commander. It wasn't until around 1060 that William could feel relatively secure of his position with Normandy well on its way to becoming the most powerful principality in the French kingdom. William was married to Matilda, daughter of Count Baldwin V of Flanders which was an important union for bolstering William's status. The couple produced four sons and five or six daughters, many of which survived to adulthood (Fig.1.).

Norman Invasion

When Edward the Confessor died on 5 January 1066 the king's advisory council, known as the Witan, nominated Harold Godwinson, Earl of Wessex and the most powerful nobleman in England, as his successor. He was crowned in Westminster Abbey the following day. The Godwine family had loomed large in the political life of England in the previous 25 years, sometimes in conflict with the king, at other times his most staunch

Dr. Richard Kelleher
Department of Coins and Medals,
Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge

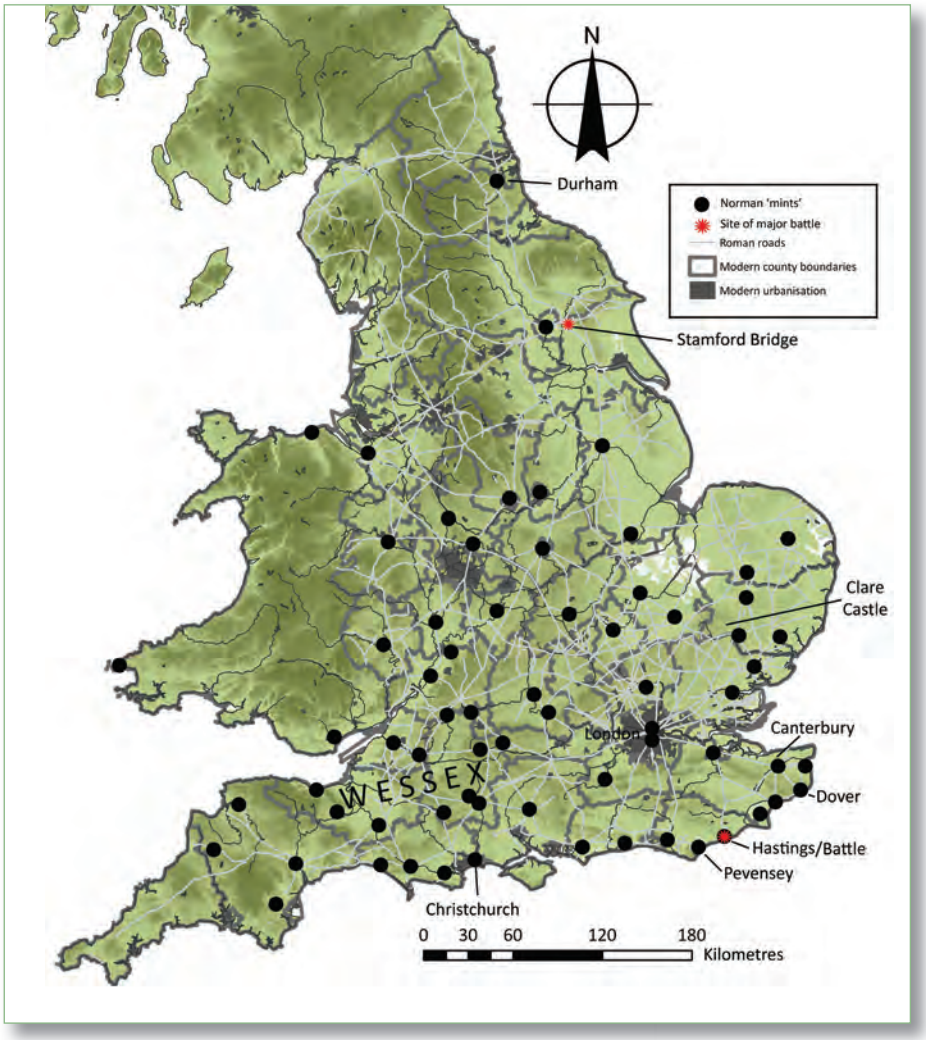
Fig.3. Scene 23 from the Bayeux Tapestry showing William giving Harold arms and armour (possibly knighting him) and Harold taking an oath upon saintly relics.

Fig.4. Denier of Normandy minted for Richard II or III (996-1026).
© Trustees of the British Museum.

ally. Harold's sister Edith had been married to Edward but they produced no children. William was a rival contender for the English throne on grounds of distant kinship and professed to have been promised the crown in 1051. Yet key to William's success in any conquest would be the support of the papacy, which he had cultivated over many years. So when he sent Lanfranc to Rome to obtain Pope Alexander II's blessing this was readily given accompanied by the sanctified papal banner. With this crucial seal of approval William was ready to press his claim and take an invading force to England.

In the two to three months in the summer of 1066 William's army gathered at Dives-sur-Mer. When assembled the army moved to St Valéry at the mouth of the river Somme. This period provided an opportunity for the knights and archers to train their ranks into a single cohesive

Fig.5. Map of mints active under William I and II in England and Wales.
© Richard Kelleher.



CM

Fig.7. Silver penny of Harold II minted by Forna at Nottingham and found at Westborough and Dry Doddington, Lincs. (© PAS: DENO-E3DCE5). Harold is shown moustached and bearded unlike his representation on the Bayeux Tapestry.

CM

Fig.8. Silver penny of William I (BMC I) struck by Aelmer at Lincoln and found on "Isle of Wight" (© PAS: IOW-93D3A4). The type is reminiscent of Harold's coins although the beard is absent. Despite the fact that William was a Norman the legends on his coins are a mixture of Latin and English and use the Anglo-Saxon wen at the start of his name (similar to the Latin P).

CM

Fig.9. Silver penny of William I (BMC II) struck by Thor at York and found at Hook, East Riding of Yorkshire (© PAS: YORYM-0F1776).

BMC	Description	Dates	Coins
I	Profile/Cross fleury	1066-68?	29
II	Bonnet	1068-70?	49
III	Canopy	1070-72?	23
IV	Two sceptres	1072-74?	45
V	Two stars	1074-77?	59
VI	Sword	1077-80?	19
VII	Profile right	1080-83?	42
VIII	PAXS	1083-86?	128

Fig.6. Table of coin types of William I with dates and numbers of recorded specimens on PAS and EMC (to 2008). © Richard Kelleher.

fighting force. The assembled army was the largest since Claudius' invasion of AD 43. William's fleet was delayed by unfavourable winds but eventually sailed while Harold was in the north defeating a Norse army led by his brother Tostig and the renowned Norwegian warrior-king Harald Hardrada at the battle of Stamford Bridge.

William's fleet landed unchallenged at Pevensey in Sussex on 26 September and found the old Saxon shore fort abandoned (Fig.2.) while Harold's army hurried south in response. On 14 October the two forces faced each other near Hastings. Harold, with his brothers Leofwine and Gyrth and his elite troops (huscarls) and militia (the fyrd) lined up on Senlac Hill (which was corrupted into Sanguelac, or lake of blood by the Normans after the battle), while the Norman line assembled opposite in three divisions. On the left were the Bretons under Duke Alan IV of Brittany, in the centre were the Norman's under William and his half-brothers Odo of Bayeux and Robert of Mortain while the right was composed of the French under William fitzOsbern and Count Eustace II of Boulogne.

The battle raged for most of the day with William's mounted knights repeatedly charging the steadfast shield wall of the English. Critically the apparent impotence of the Norman cavalry may have created a premature sense of confidence in the English line and in a feigned retreat part of William's army drew out sections of the shield wall and killed them thus exposing crucial weak points.

The events are well known, not least through the Bayeux tapestry (Fig.3.); the English were eventually worn down with Harold being killed, perhaps shot in the eye by an archer. His body was mutilated and buried on the beach, although the monks of Waltham Abbey later retrieved and reburied him.

William's victory marked the last time an invading force would successfully conquer England. He quickly moved onto Dover, Canterbury and London and was crowned at Westminster on Christmas Day 1066 scarcely a year after Harold's coronation.

Continuity Of Currency

William had inherited one of the best administered coinages in all of Europe and in actual fact did very little to change a successful system. By comparison the coins of his native Normandy were poor-quality immobilised deniers of base silver which were illegible, ill-struck and irregularly shaped (Fig.4.). At this period English coins were struck at local mints with at least one in each county (Fig.5.). Some new mints were opened such as Twynham (Christchurch) and Pevensey in Sussex and Durham, but for the most part there was continuity from Harold and Edward. More than 100 of the 140 mints of Harold II are known to have produced coins under William I and II.

As well as mints continuing to operate in spite of the Conquest, many of the moneyers also continued in post from Harold's administration to William's, suggesting that although the nobility were almost entirely wiped out middle-ranking officials and specialists, such as moneyers, might survive. In the Anglo-Saxon period dies were produced locally but one of William's only innovations was to centralise the die-cutting operation under a central die-cutter or cuneator under the stewardship of FitzOtho and his heirs in London. He also stabilised the weight standard initially at 21 grains (1.36g) raising it to 22½ grains (1.46g), probably to bring it up to an international standard – one which would remain the official norm until 1279.

CM

Fig.10. Silver penny of William I (BMC III) struck by Manna at Nottingham and found at Binbrook, Lincs. (© PAS: NLM-4DABE6). The bust is placed within an architectural frame, reminiscent of illuminated manuscripts but probably draws inspiration from contemporary German coins.

CM

Fig.11. Silver penny of William I (BMC IV) struck by Leofwine at Gloucester and found at Taynton, Glos. (© PAS: GLO-B68C53). The two sceptres on the obverse may represent the sceptre and rod used in the coronation.

CM

Fig.12. Silver penny of William I (BMC V) struck by Godwine at London and found at "Grendon Underwood", Bucks. (© PAS: BUC-C21835). Stars appear on many coin types and have been traditionally linked with Halley's comet which appeared just before the Conquest and was seen as a good omen.

CM

Fig.13. Silver penny of William I (BMC VI) struck by Godwine at Norwich and found at Besthorpe, Suffolk (© PAS: SF-3EE2C3). Swords are rarely found on medieval coins and this is the first English one to do so. Edward the Black Prince would use sword images extensively in the 14th century.

CM

Fig.14. Silver penny of William I (BMC VII) struck by Ulf, Lincoln and found at Fishtoft, Lincs. (© PAS: LIN-96C633).

Coin Types

The classification for the coins was published in 1905-6 by P.W.P. Carlyon-Britton and has stood the test of time. Thirteen sequential types of coin are known in the name of "William", eight were attributed to the Conqueror with the remaining five given to his son Rufus.

At this period the coinage was subject to periodic changes of type at regular intervals, probably every two-three years (Fig.6.). There is still some debate over the proper attribution of type VIII and we don't know for sure whether it was the last type of William I, the first type of William II or if it was minted under both kings. All of the Norman pennies share some basic characteristics. The obverse carries a legend which reads +PILLE-MVS REX (King William) or a slight variation around a stylised bust while the reverse carries the name of the moneyer and mint reading something like GOLD-PINE ON DOF (Goldwine at Dover).

The first type of William (BMC I) was probably minted between 1066 and 1068. The obverse design very much akin to that of Harold II's with a profile bust. Unlike his predecessor, William is depicted habited in a richly embroidered or jewelled robe or mantle (Figs.7 & 8.). The second type moved away from the Anglo-Saxon tradition of profile busts to a facing one, known as the bonnet type (Fig.9.). Type III saw the introduction of a canopy over the king's head (Fig.10.) while in the next three types the bust is accompanied by two sceptres, two stars and a sword (Figs.11-13.). BMC VII reverts to the profile type (Fig.14.) while in BMC VIII the facing bust returns and is accompanied on the reverse by the letters PAXS (Fig.15.). Variations of PAX appear on several rulers' coins, including those of Edward the Confessor and Harold II.

Death & Legacy

That England had changed under Norman rule is beyond doubt. In the 20 years after the Conquest a major redistribution of lands had taken place and by

CM

Fig.15. Silver penny of William I (BMC VIII) struck by Beorthwine at London and found at Bathley, Notts. (© PAS: LEIC-3F7258). The meaning of PAXS in this type and PAX in Harold's pennies remains uncertain, it could refer to the King's Peace which died with him and was re-proclaimed at his successor's coronation. Alternatively it could refer to the Chrismon invocation on contemporary documents.

Fig.17. Battle Abbey, East Sussex. The abbey was built in response to Pope Alexander II's order of 1070 to do penance for the killing of so many people during the Conquest. The church was consecrated in 1094. © Colin & Maureen Postans.

Fig.16. Clare Castle, Suffolk. It is estimated that over 500 motte and bailey castles were erected between 1066 and 1086. Clare was constructed by Richard Fitz Gilbert before 1090; the Norman motte survives with part of the 13th century keep visible. © Celia E. Bailey.

the end of the reign Normans and their allies had been granted all but about 5% of the land previously held by English secular magnates. A string of castles had sprung up and the grand Romanesque style of church architecture had replaced the Anglo-Saxon sort (Figs.16 & 17.). Perhaps the biggest legacy for historians was the **Domesday Book** of 1086 which surveyed the material wealth of the inhabitants of much of England.

William died on 9 September 1087 while campaigning in northern France and was buried at Caen. His funeral was a rather unpleasant affair for those attending. A monk who witnessed the event wrote that William was "great in body and strong, tall in stature but not ungainly". In life this had served him well; however, in death it was a problem when it was discovered that the stone sarcophagus was too small for the body. There was an attempt to force in the bloated corpse and according to the chronicler Orderic Vitalis 'the swollen bowels burst, and an intolerable stench assailed the nostrils of the by-standers and the whole crowd". Even the frankincense and spices of the censers was not enough to mask the smell, and the rites were hurriedly concluded. The Conqueror left the kingdom to his second son William Rufus who is the subject of next month's article and I will also explore in more depth how the coins of the earliest Norman's circulated and were used.

Further Reading

M. Allen, **Mints and Money in Medieval England**, Cambridge University Press, 2012.
M.M. Archibald, **'Coins' in English Romanesque Art 1066-1200**, Weidenfeld and Nicholson, London 1984.
P.W.P. Carlyon-Britton, "A numismatic history of the reigns of William I and II (1066-1100), Part I", *British Numismatic Journal 2* (1905), 87-184 and "Part II" (1906), 117-72.
M. Dolley, **The Norman Conquest and the English Coinage**, Spink: London 1966.
P. Grierson, "The monetary system under William I", in **Domesday Book Studies**, London: Alecto Historical Editions 1987.
D. Luscombe and J. Riley-Smith (eds.), **Cambridge Medieval History IV c.1024-c.1198** Part II, Cambridge University Press, 2004 (Chapter 7). TH