

The Geographic Origins of the Norman Conquerors of England

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Descended from Vikings, the Norman armies of the eleventh and twelfth centuries spread out from their home in Northern France on a quest to conquer and explore new lands beyond their duchy.¹ The most famous of these quests was the Norman Conquest of England in 1066. After many months of planning and preparation, this quest climaxed on Saturday, October 14, 1066 at the Battle of Hastings. Here, the Normans crushed the Anglo-Saxon rulers of England with the power and might of their knights.

While much has been written about this epic battle, few studies have focused squarely on the importance of some of the more fundamental characteristics of the primary combatants themselves—the Norman knights. In an attempt to partially address this deficiency, this study focuses on one particular aspect of this armed cohort: its geographic origins. Following a discussion of Duke William's leadership role and the Norman Army's organization at Hastings, the study moves to focus squarely on the as yet unexamined geographical allegiances of the Norman knights and how this might shed light on both the motivation of the combatants and their ultimate success in mobilizing the resources required to win at Hastings.

Literature review

There is no shortage of scholarly work chronicling key aspects of the Battle of Hastings. Temporally, these accounts range from the time of the battle itself until the modern era. One of the oldest and best-known sources is the Bayeux Tapestry. This account depicts the Conquest graphically from the Norman perspective,² in the form of pictures or diagrams.³ It is believed to have been funded by Bishop Odo of Bayeux, Duke William's half brother. Another well known source is the *Gesta Willelmi* by William of Poitiers, Duke William's chaplain. Insofar as he would have known the Duke and the participating nobles and knights personally, Poitier's chronicle would have likely served as a reliable and credible source.⁴ Other Norman or northern French firsthand accounts include the *Gesta Normannorum Ducum* by William of Jumièges and the *Carmen de Hastingae Proelio*.⁵ The

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only reliable Anglo-Saxon firsthand account of the battle is *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, which was compiled at several locations across England and presents the Anglo-Saxon version of the Norman Conquest.⁶ The *Chronicon ex Chronicis* is also considered a firsthand account, but it was written some time after the Battle of Hastings in the late eleventh or early twelfth century.⁷

There are also a number of more recent studies of the Battle of Hastings. For example, Stephen Morillo's edited book, *The Battle of Hastings*, offers numerous scholarly accounts of the battle and related campaign. One of these, written by Marjorie Chibnall, focuses on the structure, organization, and mobilization of the Norman army.⁸ In the same volume, Carol Gillmor discusses the assembly of the Norman fleet and its journey across the Channel.⁹ Finally, Morillo's book includes works on the battle itself, the key role played by the Norman knights in securing the Norman victory, and other aspects of the campaign more broadly.¹⁰

Other well known works include *William the Conqueror* by David Bates and *A Brief History of the Normans: The Conquests That Changed the Face of Europe* by François Neveux. The first book is extremely important in understanding the life and times of William the Conqueror, the man. The second has been integral to understanding the Normans and how their historical past helped to shape the army of 1066.¹¹

Very few works, however, have specifically examined the origins of the Norman army itself, particularly in geopolitical terms. The only specific in depth study on the subject was conducted by M. Jackson Crispin and Leonce Macary. Their work, *Falaise Roll: Recording Prominent Companions of Duke William of Normandy at the Conquest of England*, lists and discusses the origins of over three hundred people who are believed to have participated in the Norman Conquest of England in 1066,¹² including detailed information on the home location of each knight.¹³

Still, the work unfortunately lacks a comprehensive analysis of the knights' origins as well as any analysis of how these origins may be used to explain the motivation of the combatants and ultimate success in mobilizing critical resources. This study endeavors to fill this gap by undertaking a mapping approach, based on Crispin and Macary's data, and then applying this to better understand the importance of these origins in the assembly of the Norman army and its subsequent victory. This investigation could also hopefully lead to further studies and consequently a better understanding of how armies in that part of Europe were assembled, supplied and motivated more broadly in the eleventh and twelfth centuries.

Duke William of Normandy and the origins of the Conquest

William of Normandy was the seventh duke of Normandy since the duchy's founding in the early tenth century by Vikings. He was born in 1027 and was the son of Duke Robert of Normandy and Herleva, an undertaker's daughter.¹⁴ William succeeded to the ducal throne in 1035. As early as 1037, however, as the stewards appointed to care for him began

to die off or were assassinated, the Norman state began to collapse.¹⁵ Only in 1047, following numerous assassination attempts, did Duke William begin to assert a measure of control himself over the duchy. Challenges to his authority, however, remained. That same year, Duke William's cousin, Count Guy of Burgundy, and other nobles such as Nigel of the Cotentin, moved to restrict the Duke's power. Aided by the King of France,¹⁶ Duke William eventually regained control of the duchy at the Battle of Val-es-Dunes. After 1047 there were no more major revolts against William's authority until after the Norman Conquest of England in 1066.¹⁷ This allowed Norman society to stabilize and develop. It is this stability that gave Duke William the opportunity to build the alliances with the nobles upon whom he then relied to supply the troops for the Norman Conquest in 1066.

With the duchy secure, Duke William decided to marry. His choice was Matilda of Flanders. As they were cousins, however, the Church did not approve. Consequently, as penance,¹⁸ William founded abbeys in the town of Caen that still stand today. Caen in turn became one of Duke William's life projects and he built up its urban infrastructure immensely. With the founding of the two abbeys and the construction of a large castle as well beginning in 1060, the Duke established for himself a new power base in Lower Normandy and the potential to secure increased support from this region for the Norman Conquest in 1066.¹⁹

William's army

At Hastings, the Norman army was neatly organized into three types of combatants (Figure 1). These groups were then sub-divided in accordance with their geographical origins, with the Bretons on the far left, the Normans in the center and the French to the far right. The main types of soldiers were the mounted knights, the infantry, and the archers. This army reflected the social hierarchy of the time with the nobility in the leadership role,²⁰ and the rest of the population largely subservient to it.²¹ The Anglo-Saxon army on the other hand was dominated by the *housecarls*—the king's body guard. They formed the "shield wall" in front of the Anglo-Saxon army and fought around their king. The rest of the army behind the shield wall was composed of lesser troops, known as *fyrð*. Together these elements formed a single long mass of men.²²

Mounted knights

The mounted knights are the group that most people associate with the Normans and the Norman Conquest.²³ It is this group that Duke William would have fought with as he rode into battle.²⁴ It is also this group that is particularly well known and discussed in the Falaise Roll and other rolls since this group represented the nobility of Normandy and Northern France,²⁵ and for this reason was prominently displayed on the Bayeux Tapestry. Their position was at the back of the formations and their intended use was to smash through the Anglo-Saxon lines.

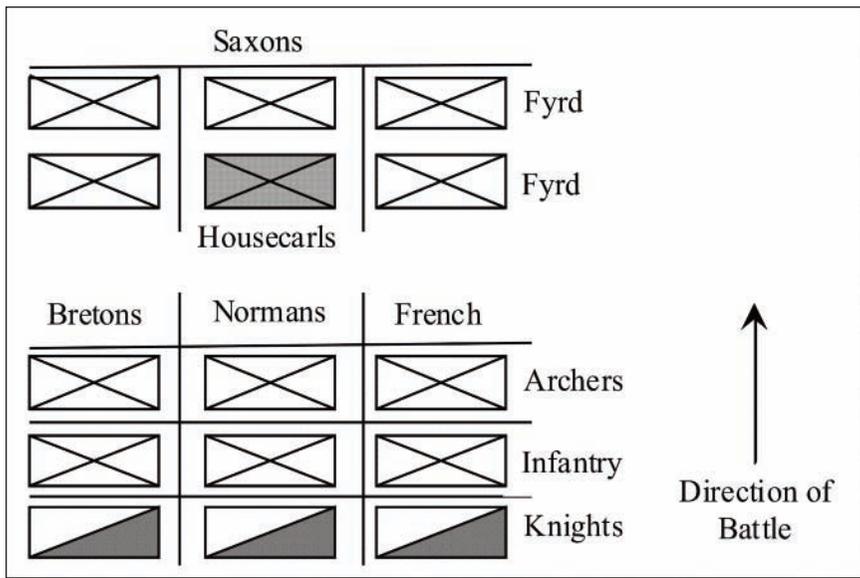


Figure 1. Norman and Anglo-Saxon Formation at Hastings, 1066. This schematic diagram presents the most accepted conceptualization of the organization of the Norman and Saxon army at the Battle of Hastings in 1066. As shown, the Duke’s army is neatly organized into nine (9) separate units, with the archers in the front (top) and the knights at the back (bottom). The arrow to the right indicates the direction of battle. The Anglo-Saxon army on the other hand would have been a single long mass of men instead of six (6) individual units as is depicted here.²⁶

The knights would have been outfitted with not only armor and weapons but also horses, which were expensive. The average noble would have required a large sum of money to afford and maintain such specialized combatants. Thus, it is not surprising that the Falaise Roll consisted primarily of more prominent and wealthy families. These included the d’Anneville, de Lacy, de Montgomery, de Montfort, de Percy, and Talbot families.²⁷ The army also included some high ranking Breton and French nobles including Alan Fergant, Count of Brittany and Eustache, Count of Boulogne.

Foot soldiers/infantry

The foot soldiers or infantry were the second group in the Duke’s army. In terms of social status, they represented inferior groups and were very likely the retainers of the nobility and mounted knights. Consequently, they would have arrived concurrently with their “masters” or with the “local” knight on the battlefield.

Numerically, the foot soldiers formed the majority of the Norman army. Because of their social position, they were not however, depicted on the Bayeux Tapestry.²⁸ These troops fought with a variety of weapons, and their protective gear ranged from heavy to light shielding. It is believed

that the best supplied, however, possessed chain-mail shirts, conical helmets, and kite-shaped shields.²⁹ Thus, they were almost as well equipped as the knights they served.

Archers

The archers were the third group of combatants at Hastings and represented the lowest ranks within the Norman army. Like the infantry, they also likely served as the retainers of the knights. However, the commanders of the archers at Hastings would have been knights or nobles. It is known, for example, that the noble Guillaume L'Archer commanded the archers on foot at the Battle of Hastings.³⁰

The archers were positioned in front of the Duke's army. They had simple bows and cross-bows, and their protective equipment varied from well armored to little or no armor.³¹ These soldiers played a significant role in the battle and its outcome, insofar as it has been widely speculated that King Harold of the Anglo-Saxons was wounded by an arrow in the eye. This in turn, it is believed, weakened his army's will sufficiently for the Normans to triumph.³²

The noble origins of Duke William's army

As was mentioned previously, Duke William drew his army from all across Normandy. This is plainly stated in William of Poitiers' account:

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....[additionally] 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.³³

But while the numerical majority (eighty-six percent) of the Norman force did indeed originate from within this region, there were also troops from outside the duchy as well (see Table 1). Most of these, however, came from close neighboring duchies or counties such as Brittany, Flanders, Picardy and the Île-de-France. This in effect, reflected that fact that the means of both communication and transportation were extremely limited at this time, restricting mobilization of combatants to areas in the immediate vicinity of the gathering location.

Spatial distribution of the Norman nobles

As mentioned earlier, the spatial distribution of the Norman lords who fought at the Battle of Hastings has to date not been a topic of interest within the literature. Its importance, however, is clear, insofar as these data allow us to better understand and explain the impact of political forces in Normandy and Northern France in the mid-eleventh century and more

Duchy/County	Number of Participants	Percent of Total
Normandy	272	86.35
Brittany	12	3.81
Flanders	8	2.54
Picardy	6	1.9
Poitou	3	0.95
Anjou	2	0.63
Aquitaine	2	0.63
Maine	2	0.63
Champagne	1	0.32
Île-de-France	1	0.32
Unknown	6	1.9
Total	315	100

Table 1. Number and Percentage of Knights per Duchy/County. This chart presents the breakdown of each entry in the Falaise Roll by Duchy or County. As demonstrated, the vast majority of nobles are from Normandy. However, the next two largest supporting regions are the Duchy of Brittany and the County of Flanders.³⁴

specifically, how Duke William was able to gather and mobilize his army at Dives-sur-Mer in the early summer of 1066.

Using the names and the locations of each noble contained in the Falaise Roll, supplemented by information provided in Crispin and Macary’s work,³⁵ a graphical depiction of the nobles’ home territories may be generated (see Figure 3). Of the 315 names listed in the Roll, sufficient information was available to plot the origins of some 190 individuals. Figure 4 provides more detailed information regarding the locations of the nobles and knights within Normandy itself.

As indicated by Figure 3 the lords who were present at the Battle of Hastings were distributed throughout Normandy. However, it is immediately apparent that there were a greater number of lords from Lower (66 percent) rather than Upper Normandy (34 percent).³⁷ This is interesting, insofar as Lower Normandy had essentially been in revolt against Duke William from his succession in 1035 to the rebels’ defeat in

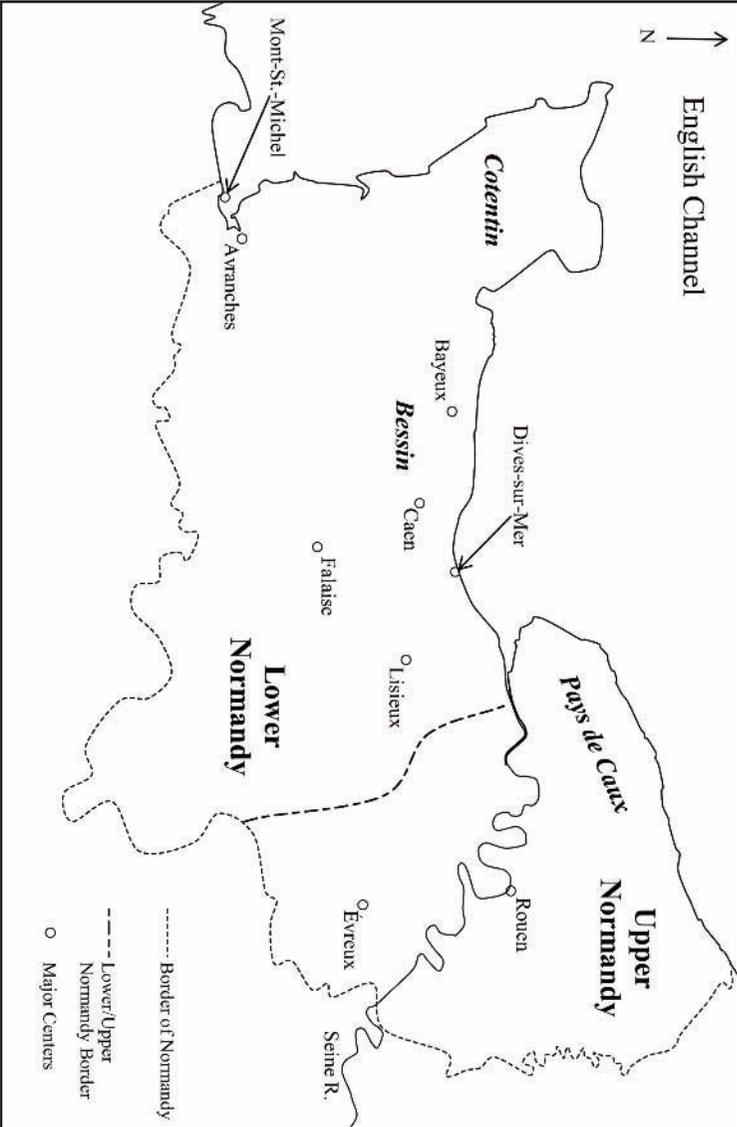


Figure 2. Significant political and regional areas of Normandy. 36

1047.³⁸ One might therefore have expected that the majority of William's support would have come from the more loyal regions in Upper Normandy where some of his high ranking and loyal followers were located. These included staunchly loyal vassals such as Guillaume fitz Osbern, the Duke's closest friend and steward,³⁹ and Hugh de Montfort, the Constable of Normandy.⁴⁰

The disproportionate presence of nobles from Lower Normandy might be explained, however, by the fact that one of Duke William's major undertakings in the period leading up to 1066 was the development of Caen as the largest urban centre in the region.⁴¹ By focusing his energy in Caen, as opposed to other areas within the duchy, it is likely that William had managed to develop a latent sense of loyalty among the local nobility.

Another critical move was William's decision to place many of his relatives in Lower Normandy. These included his two half brothers – Odo, the Bishop of Bayeux, and Robert the Count of Mortain.⁴² Both of these individuals represented influential domains, and their influence in the region would have been immense. Importantly as well, they had a significant hand in gathering men and supplies for the Conquest. Not only were there mentions in the Roll of numerous other lords originating in these two regions,⁴³ but also William's half brothers were the two largest contributors of ships to the expedition, as shown in Table 2, below. It is also interesting to note that few of the participating nobles in the Battle of Hastings were from the Cotentin Peninsula. Moreover, and none were reported to have supplied ships (as observed in Table 2). This would suggest a clear demarcation between Lower Normandy and the Cotentin Peninsula (Figure 4). In part, this demarcation could reflect continued resentment of William's rule within this region, insofar as the revolt of 1047 discussed earlier was in fact led by a prominent Cotentin lord.⁴⁴

Still another trend which is of interest is the relationship between the nobles' and knights' origins and the relative density of early Viking settlement in the duchy. According to a map of settlement names, there was a high density of Viking settlers in the Cotentin Peninsula and the Pays de Caux region.⁴⁵ It is in precisely these regions where fewer Norman combatants originated, as opposed to the Bessin region around Bayeux which had far fewer Viking settlement names and thus fewer descendants of Viking settlers. Therefore, the Normans who fought at the Battle of Hastings were more likely to have possessed French than Viking/Nordic ancestry.⁴⁶

The lack of support from the old Norman families of Viking descent for William's army could be related to the deep ties this community maintained with previous dukes of Normandy. Many in fact were linked to the Richardides faction, the descendants of dukes Richard I and Richard II. According to Neveux, the Richardides "formed the hard core of the Norman aristocracy, and the dukes [also] relied on them to govern the duchy"⁴⁹ One of the leaders of the revolt which ended in 1047 was in fact the prominent Richardide Count Guy of Burgundy. In the period after 1047, Count Guy and many of his supporters were exiled or deposed.⁵⁰ The

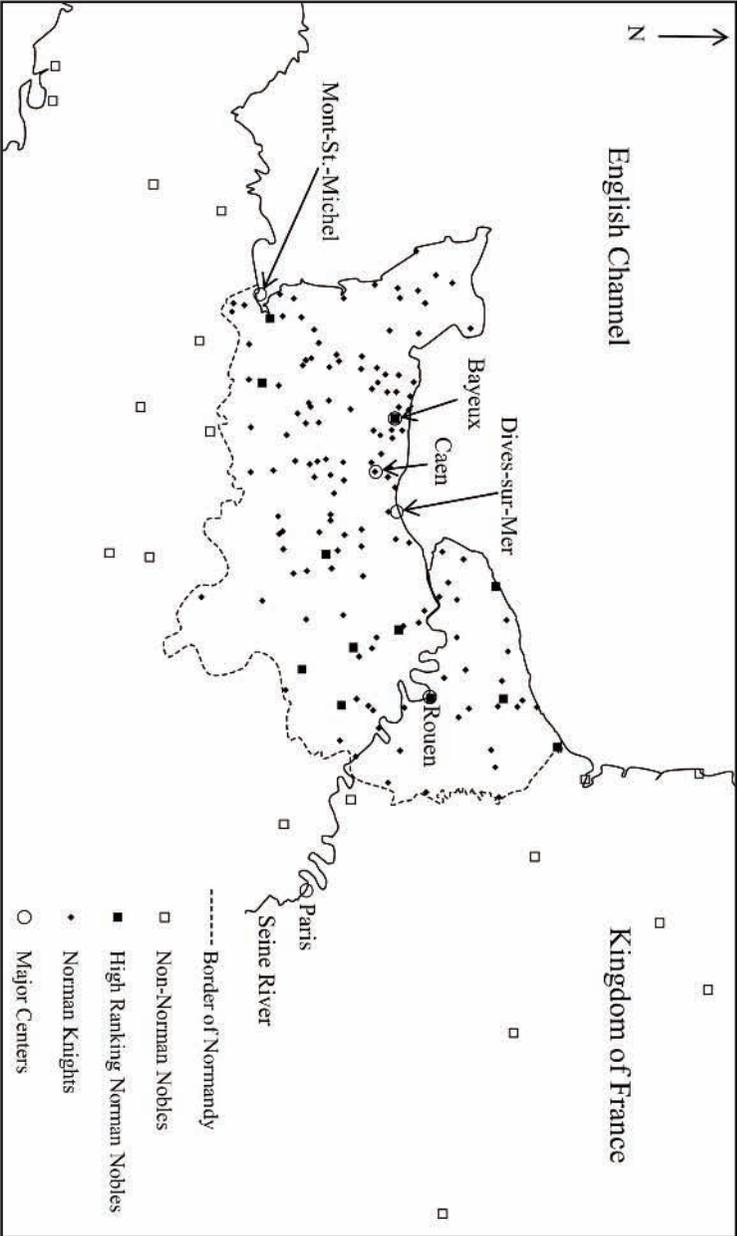


Figure 3. Participants in the Battle of Hastings. This map presents the locations of the family names mentioned in the Falaise Roll. This map was developed by the author using the Google Map template. For a more detailed version of the map which specifically focuses on Normandy please see Figure 4.⁴⁷

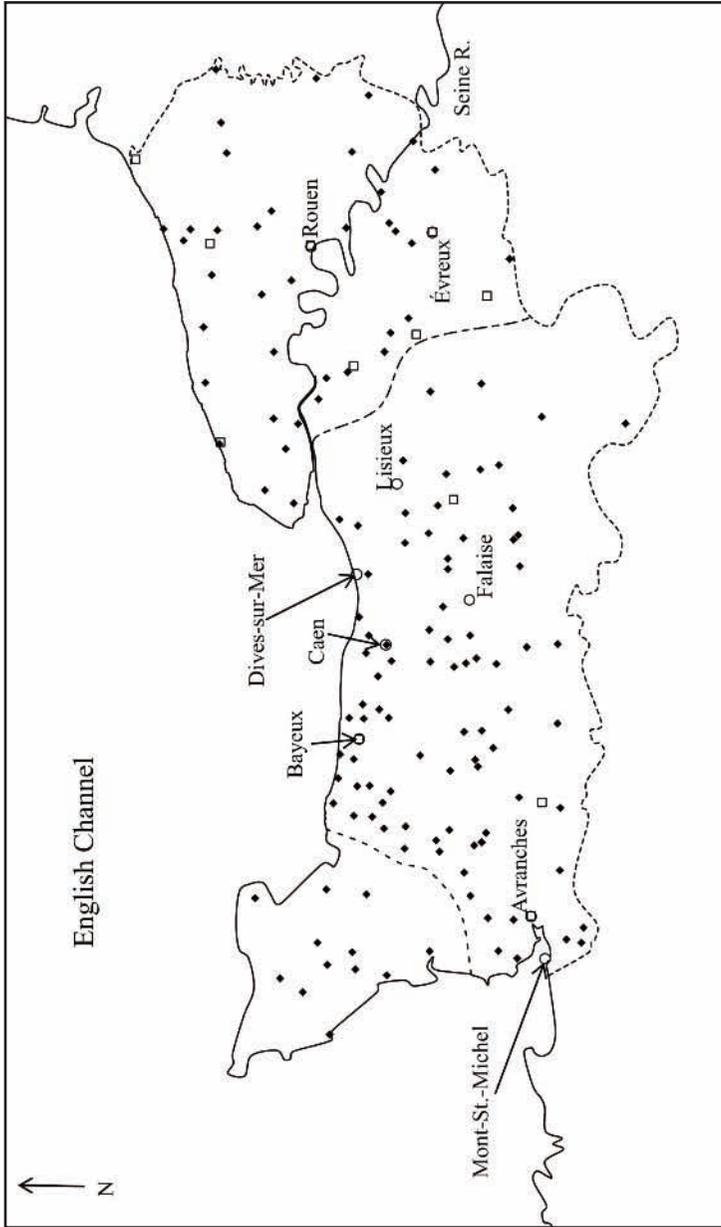


Figure 4. The locations of the Norman knights from the Battle of Hastings. This image, a more detailed version of Figure 3, specifically focuses on the nobles and knights from Normandy.

Noble	Number of Ships	Percent of Total Force
Robert of Mortain	120	17.24
Odo, Bishop of Bayeux	100	14.37
Count Richard of Évreux	80	11.49
William fitz Osbern	60	8.62
Count Robert of Eu	60	8.62
Viscount Hugh of Avranches	60	8.62
Roger of Montgomery	60	8.62
Roger of Beaumont	60	8.62
Hugh of Montfort	50	7.18
Walter Giffard	30	4.31
Abbot of Saint-Ouen of Rouen	15	2.16
Abbot of Fécamp	1	0.14
Total	696	100

Table 2. List of High Ranking Norman Nobles by Number and Percentage of Ships. This table presents the highest ranking Norman nobles and the number and percentage of ships they supplied for the invasion effort. The data in light gray fields indicate which nobles came from Lower Normandy. These nobles are indicated separately from the knights in Figure 3 and Figure 4.⁴⁸

Richardides who remained may very well have harbored ill feelings against the Duke and as a result may well have been less willing to support him in his quest to England.

It is worth noting as well that there were also more supporters of Duke William from regions along or close to the coast as well as near major river systems. This is significant because as part of the preparations for the conquest, the Norman nobles and knights would have been required to construct ships which would have been more efficient if their lands were next to a body of water for efficient transport to the army's assembly point at Dives-sur-Mer.⁵¹

There could additionally have been a seasonal factor in the distribution of the home locations of the combatants. Duke William began acquiring supporters for his expeditionary force in the winter and early spring of 1066.⁵² The ships were probably constructed in late spring and summer of 1066, as travel time to the departure point at Dives-sur-Mer would not have been inhibited by snow melt and or heavy rain. One observer indicates in fact that the most amount of time Duke William had to construct the ships was three months.⁵³ Therefore, nobles without easy access to either the sea or river systems would have been hard pressed to build their ships and bring them to the departure point by late summer. In fact, it is assumed that the army and fleet were ready to sail for England by August or September 1066.⁵⁴ Thus, the limited amount of time the nobles had to build the ships could have influenced the strength of the army and in particular who participated.

Conclusion

The geographic analysis undertaken here sheds new light on the composition and motivation of Duke William's army at Hastings, and ultimately, its success in mobilizing the resources required for victory. Using mapping techniques, the role and the interplay of regional affiliations, political loyalties and disputes, ancestry, proximity and ease of access to the departure point, and seasonal factors may be readily highlighted and understood as a complement to the already existing and detailed literature regarding the Norman Conquest.

This approach suggests additional research as well on other geographic aspects of the Conquest. For example, an as yet unknown and previously unanalyzed factor concerns those nobles who may have arrived at Dives-sur-Mer with other nobles or as retainers of the great nobles, and consequently were not listed in the Roll. For example, Robert de Beaumont was the son of one of the highest ranking nobles in Normandy. It is very likely that he would have come to Dives with a large retainer of knights to lead in battle.⁵⁵ One knight who fought under another lord was Auvrai le Breton, who as Crispin and Macary suggest, fought for Alain Le Roux, a higher ranking Breton at Hastings.⁵⁶ Unfortunately, however, such information is not readily available, nor is data concerning the specific origins of the infantry and the archers who fought alongside William in England.

Future research might also focus on the support of the coastal French from outside the region of Normandy, a more detailed assessment of the impact of local uprisings over the years on William's ability to secure the military allegiance required from within his domain, the distribution of wealth among the Norman nobility and even the effect of potential links of the Norman to the Anglo-Saxon nobility. Such topics are well beyond the scope of the present study but certainly represent important avenues for exploration.

What we have demonstrated here in some measure however, is a much enhanced illustration of the geographic diversity of the Norman army and its primary combatants. With representation from southern Brittany in the southwest to Boulogne in the northeast, and every part of Normandy, the army of the Norman Conquest was a fair depiction of the duchy and region. However, the regional differences of complex politics, past historical events, and strong loyalties lead to spatial differences in the numbers of knights present from one region over another, and more importantly, help explain William's relative ability to mobilize both the military forces and the resources required to undertake the invasion of England. This in turn represents a critical insight into the origins and outcome of one of most chronicled adventures in Medieval history.

Notes

1. Christopher Gravett, *Norman Knight, AD 950-1204* (Oxford: Osprey Publishing Ltd., 1993). The Vikings were tribes from Scandinavia who raided Western Europe from the late eighth to the mid eleventh century. Their favored target was England but they went to France and other countries as well.
2. Stephen Morillo, ed. *The Battle of Hastings: Sources and Interpretations* (New York: Boydell Press, 1996), 33.
3. *Ibid.*, 33.
4. *Ibid.*, 3.
5. *Ibid.*, 17 and 45.
6. *Ibid.*, 21.
7. *Ibid.*, 29.
8. *Ibid.*, 79.
9. *Ibid.*, 113.
10. *Ibid.*, 165, 195, and 219.
11. David Bates, *William the Conqueror*, 3rd edition, (Brimscombe Port: The History Press, 2008) and François Neveux, *A Brief History of the Normans: The Conquests that Changed the Face of Europe*, translated by Howard Curtis (London: Constable & Robinson Ltd, 2008).
12. M. Jackson Crispin and Leonce Macary, *Falaise Roll: Recording Prominent Companions of Duke William of Normandy at the Conquest of England* (Baltimore: Genealogical Publishing Company, 1969), xvii.
13. *Ibid.*, 1-112.
14. Bates, 39.
15. *Ibid.*, 46-7.
16. *Ibid.*, 48. The King of France was Duke William's direct superior. In 1047, this was King Henry I.
17. Neveux, 123, 202-3.

18. *Ibid.*, 118-121. A penance was a task imposed by the Catholic Church to “pay” for a “wrong” committed in society.
19. *Ibid.*, 121-23.
20. This includes the mounted knights who directed the battle from their horses.
21. The foot soldiers and the archers represent the subservient population who were commanded by the knights.
22. Morillo, *The Battle of Hastings*, xxiii, and Neveux, 136.
23. Andrew Bridgeford, *1066: The Hidden History of the Bayeux Tapestry* (London: Fourth Estate, 2004), plates 45-59, and Bates, 17.
24. The fact that Duke William rode into battle is evident from many sources including the Bayeux Tapestry, which depicts him mounted with his knights. Bridgeford, plates 44-54. It is also evident from his seal which shows him fully armored and on his horse. Crispin and Macary, iii.
25. The Falaise Roll is a list of the supporters of Duke William of Normandy for his Conquest of England in 1066. Crispin and Macary, xv-xvii.
26. Morillo, *The Battle of Hastings*, xxv, and C. Q. Cutshaw, “Maps, Charts, and Symbols, Military,” in *Brassey’s Encyclopedia of Military History and Biography*, ed. F. D. Margiotta (Washington: Brassey’s Inc., 1994), 653.
27. Crispin and Macary, 32, 22-3, 100-1, 60, 47, 51.
28. Marjorie Chibnall, “Military Service in Normandy Before 1066,” in Morillo, *The Battle of Hastings*, 81, and Bridgeford, plates 45-59.
29. Stephen Morillo, *Warfare Under the Anglo-Norman Kings, 1066-1135* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 1994), 48.
30. Crispin and Macary, 32-3.
31. Bridgeford, plates 48-9.
32. Neveux, 138, and Morillo, *The Battle of Hastings*, xxix.
33. William of Poitiers, “*Gesta Willelmi*,” in Morillo, *The Battle of Hastings*, 7.
34. Table 1 was developed by the author from data compiled from Crispin and Macary, 1-112.
35. Crispin and Macary, xv-xvii.
36. This map is a reproduction of a Google Map that was developed by the author. “Domains of the Norman Knights at Hastings 1066,” Google Maps, <http://maps.google.ca/maps/ms?hl=en&ie=UTF8&msa=0&msid=115780900956647828876.000468120f0c64707a1cc&z=7> (accessed June 2, 2010). The political borders are based upon modern boundaries and do not reflect the boundaries in the eleventh century. The three regions displayed on the map are based upon the regions displayed in the map in John Haywood, *The Penguin Historical Atlas of the Vikings* (London: Penguin Books Ltd., 1995), 80-1.
37. Maps use modern boundaries as opposed to the medieval boundaries.
38. Neveux, 112-6.
39. Crispin and Macary, 41-2.
40. *Ibid.*, 60-1.
41. Neveux, 122.
42. Bates, 42.
43. For the nobles near Bayeux and Mortain, see Figure 4.
44. Neveux, 115.
45. Haywood, 80-1.
46. *Ibid.*
47. This map is a reproduction of a Google Map developed by the author. The most likely reason why non-Normans were present at Hastings was for financial gain, belief in the cause or the adventure. This is also indicated by the quotation from William of Poitiers. “Domains of the Norman Knights at Hastings 1066,” Google Maps, <http://maps.google.ca/maps/ms?hl=en&ie=UTF8&msa=0&msid=115780900956647828876.000468120f0c64707a1cc&z=7>

UTF8&msa=0&msid=115780900956647828876.000468120f0c64707a1cc&z=7, accessed June 2, 2010.

48. Table 2 was created by the author from data in Neveux, 133. The high ranking nobles were those nobles who supplied the large number of ships that were required for the Conquest to succeed.
49. Neveux, 91.
50. *Ibid.*, 123-4.
51. C. M. Gillmor, "Naval Logistics of the Cross-Channel Operation, 1066," in Morillo, *The Battle of Hastings*, 126-7.
52. R. A. Brown, *The Normans and the Norman Conquest* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 1985), 129.
53. Gillmor, 124.
54. Brown, 131, and C. Grainge and G. Grainge, "The Pevensey Expedition: Brilliantly Executed Plan or Near Disaster?" in Morillo, *The Battle of Hastings: Sources and Interpretations*, 137.
55. Crispin and Macary, 87.
56. *Ibid.*, 2-5.