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KING  
HARALD'S SAGA

Harald Hardradi of Norway

\*

FROM SNORRI STURLUSON'S  
*HEIMSKRINGLA*

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PENGUIN BOOKS

1980

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## Introduction

THE year 1066 was a convulsive and fateful year for the destiny of England and western Europe. It was the year that brought together in violent and mortal conflict the three greatest military leaders in Europe of their day – Harald of Norway, Harold of England, and William of Normandy; three powerful and ambitious men who had fought their way to authority in their respective countries and who now, in three weeks of terrible bloodshed in the autumn of 1066, were to fight to the death for the greatest prize of all: the throne of England.

In Norway, King Harald Sigurdsson – Harald Hardradi, Harald the Ruthless, as later historians were to dub him – had fled into exile in 1030 at the age of fifteen when Norway was torn by civil war and his half-brother, King Olaf the Saint, was killed in battle by an army of his own rebellious subjects. After years of plundering in the Mediterranean and Asia Minor as a Viking mercenary in the service of the Byzantine emperors, Harald returned to claim the throne of Norway his brother had lost; and for the next twenty years he ruled Norway by iron discipline and force of arms, and terrorized neighbouring Denmark by constant raiding expeditions. By 1066 he was the most feared warrior in northern Europe, the last of the formidable Viking kings of Scandinavia; and at the age of fifty-one he embarked on the most ambitious enterprise of his relentless career – the conquest of England.

In France, Duke William of Normandy – William the Bastard as his contemporaries called him, William the Conqueror as he was to prove himself – had succeeded to a turbulent province as an illegitimate orphan at the age of seven, in 1035. His boyhood was a nightmare of treachery and danger; and even when he reached manhood he had to survive seven years of incessant warfare and rebellion between 1047 and 1054 before he was able to establish his authority over Normandy beyond serious dispute. By 1066, he was the battle-hardened

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leader of the most brilliant new secular and ecclesiastical aristocracy in Europe; and in his late thirties he was ready to claim by force what he regarded as a moral inheritance – the throne of England.

In England, Earl Harold Godwinsson – Harold of Wessex, later to become Harold II of England – was born into one of the most thrustful and ambitious family dynasties in Anglo-Saxon England. During the uneasy reign of Edward the Confessor (1042–66) he survived exile, and then returned to prove his military ability with crushing campaigns against the Welsh, and also his statesmanship by averting civil war between north and south over his brother, Earl Tostig. On 6 January 1066, at the age of forty-four, he was elected and crowned king of England – an England whose throne was threatened by rival claims from Scandinavia and Normandy, and weakened by lingering disaffection in the north. For the next nine months, Harold was busy organizing the nation's defences against the challenge he knew must come; what he could not know was from where it would come first.

In the event, it came from the north. In September 1066 Harald of Norway sailed across the North Sea with an invasion armada of over 300 ships and came prowling down the coast of Yorkshire. On 20 September, he landed his army of some 9,000 men and destroyed the northern army that barred his way to York at Fulford. But five days later, on Monday, 25 September, Harold of England arrived with another army after a forced march of 190 miles from London, and fell upon the surprised Norwegian invaders at Stamford Bridge. The slaughter that ensued was remembered with awe for generations; by nightfall, the Norwegian army was all but wiped out, and Harald of Norway lay dead. His death marked the end, to all intents and purposes, of the Viking era that so coloured the politics of medieval Europe, the end of 350 years of Scandinavian harassment of England.

But when Harald of Norway died, his victor, Harold of England, himself had only nineteen more days to live. Three days after the Battle of Stamford Bridge, William of Normandy, descendant of the Viking invaders who had settled in France

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150 years earlier, landed on the south coast of England with an army of 7,000 men; and Harold of England set off on a forced march once again, to fight the last battle to be fought on English soil against an invasion army, on the Downs above Hastings on 14 October 1066.

Just as the Battle of Stamford Bridge finally settled the Scandinavian threat, so the Battle of Hastings was to decide the fate and future destiny of Great Britain; and had it not been for the Norwegian invasion in the north of England some three weeks earlier, the Norman invasion in the south might well have ended very differently. In these three autumn weeks of 1066, the tension of the triangle formed by Norway, England, and Normandy, was decisively resolved. And it is one of the sides of that triangle – the conflict between Norway and England, between Viking Harald and Anglo-Saxon Harold – that forms the climax of *King Harald's Saga*.

*King Harald's Saga* is the biography of one of the most remarkable and memorable of the medieval kings of Norway; and it forms part of one of the most remarkable works of history to emerge from medieval Europe – *Heimskringla* ('The Orb of the World'), written some 170 years after the death of King Harald by the great Icelandic historian and saga-writer, Snorri Sturluson.

*Heimskringla* is truly an immense work, nothing more nor less than a complete history of Norway from prehistoric times down to 1177, told in a series of royal biographies of all the kings who occupied the throne of Norway. The vastness of its scope and conception is implicit in the very first words, the words that gave it its name – '*Heims kringla, . . .*' 'The orb of the world, on which mankind dwells. . .'. It starts far back in the remotest past, in a world of mythology peopled by shadowy legendary figures, the world of Odin and the Norse gods from whom sprang the royal house of Sweden and Norway (*Ynglinga Saga*); it continues through the semi-legendary decades of the ninth century, the era of Halfdan the Black, first

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tive flavour to *King Harald's Saga* and the rest of *Heimskringla*. There are no fewer than ninety-one stanzas, culled from the work of twelve poets, studding the narrative of *King Harald's Saga*, and he used them as the historical kernel, as evidence of the 'journeyings and battles' he referred to in his Introduction; they created the framework which he fleshed out with traditional accounts, both oral and written, and his own interpretations.

Snorri wrote in *King Harald's Saga* (chapter 36):

A great deal of information about King Harald is contained in the poems which Icelandic poets presented to him and his sons; and because of his interest in poetry, he was a great friend of theirs.

Snorri might have added that because of Harald's generosity, the poets were great friends of his, too; indeed, he quotes a half-strophe by King Harald's favourite Court Poet, Thjodolf Arnorrsson, which praises the king's generosity to his poets (chapter 99).

For Snorri, as a Court Poet himself and a close student of Court Poetry, understood the essential relationship between a king and his poets. Basically, it was a strict business relationship; the Icelandic Court Poets were professionals who sold their eulogies to foreign monarchs wherever the Norse tongue was spoken and this *genre* of poetry appreciated. They did not necessarily owe any personal allegiance to the kings they praised; indeed, one of the most remarkable Court Poems ever written in Icelandic, by Snorri Sturluson's great ancestor, Egil Skalla-Grimsson, was a eulogy composed in honour of his most bitter enemy – Eirik Blood-Axe. On that occasion, in York c. 950, Egil composed for Eirik Blood-Axe the poem *Head-Ransom* on the eve of his execution – not for payment in gold but, as the title indicates, for his head; and Eirik was so impressed with it that he granted Egil his life.

Snorri was well aware of the poetic conventions – that all kings, whoever they were, had to be called brave, gallant in battle, scourges of their enemies, etc. But he could also tell the merely conventional; for he knew that some poets – and usually the best ones – often became inseparably attached to

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their kings, giving them an emotional allegiance and sometimes choosing to die by their side, as Thjodolf Arnorrsson became attached to King Harald and as many of St Olaf's greatest poets did.

The kings used their poets deliberately as royal annalists, and royal propagandists. Snorri tells a story in his *St Olaf's Saga* to illustrate this: just before his last battle at Stiklestad, St Olaf summoned his Court Poets into his shield-rampart and said to them:

You are to stay here and see what happens; then you will not need others to tell you of it later, for you can tell the story and make verses about it yourselves afterwards.

Throughout *Heimskringla*, Snorri is careful to make a distinction between poems composed some time after the event, and poems composed at the time by eyewitnesses; in *King Harald's Saga*, the retrospective account is always introduced by the phrase 'In the words of the poet. . .', in contrast to the on-the-spot account which is prefaced by the words 'Then the poet said. . .'. But despite Snorri's manifest care, there are times in the saga when his poetry sources have misled him, however 'correctly composed and sensibly interpreted' they were. Sometimes the 'journeyings and battles' came adrift from their context and were misapplied; for instance, the verses about Earl Waltheof and his resistance to William of Normandy, attributed to the poet Thorkel Skallason and cited in chapters 96 and 97, seem to have referred to Waltheof's uprising in 1069 and not, as Snorri thought, to the Battle of Hastings. And it is ironic that although Snorri confidently cites the authority of Court Poets for the fact that Harald blinded the Byzantine emperor (chapter 14), Greek sources prove conclusively that Snorri made Harald blind the *wrong* emperor.

Apart from these main sources – earlier written histories, and Court Poetry – Snorri Sturluson had one other source of material at his disposal – oral traditions. It is very hard to form any kind of accurate assessment of the value Snorri placed on these. By the thirteenth century, there cannot have been very many ungarbled oral traditions left that earlier historians had not used or rejected; and Snorri's references to Ari Thorgilsson

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(122) In his Introduction to *Heimskringla* stress the great age of his informants, and the long span of years their memories could cover. However Snorri also seems to have used his time in Norway and Sweden to collect oral traditions, and to visit the burial mounds of many of the earlier kings and other historic sites to gain information for himself. Snorri's foster-father, Jon Loptsson, was very knowledgeable about twelfth-century Norwegian affairs, and will have told Snorri of events which he himself had witnessed in Norway. More significantly, perhaps, Snorri's own ancestor, Halldor Snorrason, was one of King Harald's close companions during his years as a Varangian mercenary in the Mediterranean; and it is more than likely that family traditions about King Harald were handed down from generation to generation, and that these helped to shape Snorri's portrait of this remarkable warrior-king of Norway.

There is one further factor that should be borne in mind when one tries to assess Snorri Sturluson's methods and achievement in his portrayal of King Harald Sigurdsson – and that is the audience for whom he was writing. We know of one saga-history at least, written in the second half of the thirteenth century, which was specifically commissioned by a king of Norway – the biography of King Hakon Hakonsson, *King Hakon's Saga*, commissioned the year after King Hakon's death in 1263 by his son, King Magnus Hakonsson, from Snorri Sturluson's nephew, Sturla Thordarson. It has also been suggested that *King Sverrir's Saga* (see above, p. 22) was commissioned from Abbot Karl Jonsson by King Sverrir himself; and although there is no evidence to support this directly, King Sverrir undoubtedly had a hand in shaping its narrative.

In Snorri Sturluson's case, there can be no doubt whatsoever that *Heimskringla* was written not for a Norwegian audience, but an Icelandic one, although in his Prologue to *St Olaf's Saga* Snorri also recognizes the possibility that his work might find its way abroad:

I realize that if this account should reach other countries, it will be thought that I have spoken rather too much about Icelanders;

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but the reason for this is the fact that the Icelanders who witnessed the events or heard about them, brought to this country the stories which later generations have since learned.

Presumably, Snorri must have hoped that *Heimskringla* would reach a wider public – what author does not? But because it was primarily intended for Icelandic audiences, it should be remembered that Snorri's viewpoint and sympathies did not necessarily coincide with Norwegian ideas. Norway, after all, was a foreign country, and an Icelander was quite capable of sympathizing with Norway's enemies.

To the early Norwegian historians, like the monk Theodoricus (*Historia de antiquitate regum Norwagiensium*, c. 1180), King Harald was a model king, described as being powerful, sagacious, brave in battle, steadfast, and ambitious. In some of the early Icelandic histories, it is King Harald's kindness and fairness and sense of humour that are emphasized – no doubt because, as Snorri states (chapter 36), King Harald seems to have treated Iceland sympathetically. To the Danish-inspired historians, however, King Harald was the embodiment of all evil – not surprisingly, considering how severely Denmark suffered from his constant attacks. The German monk Adam of Bremen, writing his history of the archbishopric of Hamburg less than a decade after Harald's death (*Gesta Hammaburgensis Ecclesiae Pontificum*, c. 1072), gained most of his information about Scandinavia from Harald's arch-enemy, King Svein Ulfsson of Denmark, and Harald appears in his pages as the devil incarnate; and some later historians even accused him of having murdered his own brother, St Olaf.

(This is certainly more in keeping with King Harald's familiar nickname, Harald the Ruthless; but the sobriquet *Harðráði* was never used by the early historians, and it first appeared only in occasional chapter-headings in manuscript copies dating from the thirteenth century.)

Snorri Sturluson's approach to the portrayal of King Harald was at once more objective and much more personal; it cannot be stressed too often that *King Harald's Saga* is essentially one individual writer's interpretation of King Harald and of certain personality conflicts during his reign.

### KING HARALD'S SAGA

*Many were lost in the water;  
The drowned sank to the bottom.  
Warriors lay thickly fallen  
Around the young Earl Morcar.  
Harald's son, young Olaf,  
Pursued the fleeing English  
Running before King Harald.  
Praise the brave prince Olaf.*

This is from the poem which Stein Herdisarson composed in honour of King Harald's son, Olaf, and it makes it clear that Olaf took part in this battle with his father. This is also mentioned in the *Harald's Poem*:<sup>1</sup>

(121)  
*Waltheof's warriors  
All lay fallen  
In the swampy water,  
Gashed by weapons;  
And the hardy  
Men of Norway  
Could cross the marsh  
On a causeway of corpses.*

Earl Waltheof fled with the survivors towards the town of York, and there was great carnage there.

The battle was fought on the Wednesday before St Matthew's Day.<sup>2</sup>

## 86. At Stamford Bridge

EARL TOSTIG had travelled north from Flanders to join King Harald as soon as he arrived in England, and so the earl took part in all these battles.<sup>3</sup>

1. Nothing else is known about this poem, and no other fragment of it has survived.

2. 20 September 1066.

3. According to English sources, Earl Tostig came to England early in May and harried the Sussex coast before occupying Sandwich.

### AT STAMFORD BRIDGE

And just as Earl Tostig had told Harald previously, a large number of Englishmen came and joined them; these were Earl Tostig's friends and kinsmen, and they added greatly to the strength of Harald's army.

After the battle which has just been described, most of the people in the surrounding district submitted to King Harald, but some fled.

King Harald now prepared to advance on the town of York, and assembled his army at Stamford Bridge;<sup>1</sup> and since he had won such a great victory against powerful chieftains and a mighty army, all the inhabitants were too frightened to offer any resistance. So the townspeople decided to send a message to King Harald, offering to deliver themselves and the town into his power.

In accordance with this offer, King Harald marched on York with all his army on the Sunday.<sup>2</sup> Just outside the town he held an assembly of his men, attended also by representatives of the townspeople. All the townspeople gave their allegiance to King Harald, and gave him as hostages the sons of all the leading men; Earl Tostig knew about everyone in the town.

In the evening, King Harald went back to his ships, de-

His brother, King Harold of England, saw this as the forerunner of an invasion from Normandy; he mobilized the largest fleet and army England had ever known, and marched to Sandwich. Tostig retreated northwards, but when he attempted to land at the Humber he was driven off by Earl Edwin and Earl Morcar. He escaped with twelve small ships to Scotland, where he spent the summer raising forces with which to join King Harald of Norway in his invasion of England, as they had planned.

1. Stamford Bridge is on the River Derwent, seven miles east of York, although the saga author clearly thought it was close to the Norwegian naval headquarters at Riccall. This was where all the roads of eastern Yorkshire converged on the crossing of the Derwent, and was a strategic position from which to dominate the county while negotiating the capitulation of York. But it is a little hard to understand why King Harald should have camped with his army so far away from his ships.

2. 24 September 1066.

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lighted with this easy victory; it had been agreed to hold a meeting in the town early the next morning, at which King Harald was to appoint officials to rule the town and distribute titles and estates.<sup>1</sup>

But that very same evening after sunset, King Harold Godwinson of England arrived at York from the south with a huge army, and rode straight into the town with the full consent of all the townspeople. Then all the town's gates were closed and all the roads blocked, so that the news should not reach the Norwegians. The English army spent the night in the town.<sup>2</sup>

### 87. The armies meet

ON Monday, when King Harald Sigurdsson had breakfasted, he ordered the trumpets to sound the order for disembarkation. He got the army ready and divided his forces, choosing which of them were to go with him and which were to stay behind:

1. In fact, the meeting was to be held at Stamford Bridge, where hostages from the rest of Yorkshire were to be brought to King Harald. According to English sources, York capitulated on the day of the Battle of Fulford, but King Harald, instead of occupying the city, accepted provisions and hostages and then took his army back to his ships at Riccall. A treaty was arranged, whereby the citizens of York would join the Norwegians and march south with them to attempt the conquest of all England. Harald then marched to Stamford Bridge, leaving his ships at Riccall, and camped there on Sunday, 24 September, to await the hostages from the county.

2. King Harold Godwinson had no knowledge of the Norwegian invasion until Harald of Norway landed at Riccall. He set off at once from London on a forced march northwards, gathering reinforcements on the way. According to English sources, he spent the night of 24 September at Tadcaster, nine miles south-west of York; it was not until the following morning, 25 September, that he marched through York, which the Norwegians had not garrisoned; after a march of seventeen miles, he could scarcely have reached Stamford Bridge before noon.

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from each company two men were to go for every one that was left behind.

Earl Tostig prepared his troops for landing to go with King Harald; the men who were left behind to guard the ships were the king's son, Olaf, Earl Paul and Earl Erlend of Orkney, and Eystein Orri, the noblest of all the landed men and dearest to the king, to whom the king had promised his daughter Maria in marriage.<sup>1</sup>

The weather was exceptionally fine, with warm sunshine; so the troops left their armour behind and went ashore with only their shields, helmets, and spears, and girt with swords. A number of them also had bows and arrows. They were all feeling very carefree.

But as they approached the town they saw a large force riding to meet them. They could see the cloud of dust raised by the horses' hooves, and below it the gleam of handsome shields and white coats of mail. King Harald halted his troops and summoned Earl Tostig, and asked him what army this could be. Earl Tostig said he thought it was likely to be a hostile force, although it was also possible that these were some of his kinsmen seeking mercy and protection from the king in exchange for their faith and fealty. The king said they had better wait there and find out more about this army. They did so; and the closer the army came, the greater it grew, and their glittering weapons sparkled like a field of broken ice.<sup>2</sup>

### 88. Preparations

KING HARALD SIGURDSSON said, 'We must now think up a good and effective plan, for it is quite obvious that these are hostile troops; it must be the king himself.'

Earl Tostig replied, 'The first thing to do is to turn and head back to our ships as quickly as possible for the rest of our men

1. *Eystein Orri was the son of Thorberg Arnason. He was the brother of King Harald's concubine, Thora.*

2. There is no suggestion in the English sources that Harold had any cavalry with him at Stamford Bridge; but the Housecarls,



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and weapons. Then we will be in a stronger position to face them, or else we could let our ships protect us, for then the cavalry could not get at us.'

'I have another plan,' said King Harald. 'We shall send three brave warriors on the fastest horses we have, and let them ride with all speed to inform our men – and they will come to our help at once. The English will have a very hard fight of it before we accept defeat.'

The earl told the king to decide in this as in everything else, and added that it was by no means his own wish to flee.

So King Harald ordered his banner, 'Land-Waster', to be raised; it was carried by a man called Fridrek.

### 89. Battle array

KING HARALD now drew up his army, and formed a long and rather thin line; the wings were bent back until they met, thus forming a wide circle of even depth all the way round, with shields overlapping in front and above. The king himself was inside the circle with his standard and his own retinue of hand-picked men.

Earl Tostig was also stationed inside the circle with his own company, and he had his own banner.

The army was formed up in this way because King Harald knew that cavalry always attacked in small detachments and then wheeled away at once. The king said that his own retinue and Earl Tostig's company would make sorties to wherever the need was greatest: 'Our archers are also to stay here with us. Those in the front rank are to set their spear-shafts into the ground and turn the points towards the riders' breasts when they charge us; and those immediately behind are to set their spears against the horses' chests.'

although they always fought on foot, were always mounted during marches. The saga account may be coloured here by stories of the Norman cavalry at Hastings.

### 90. Harold Godwinsson

KING HAROLD GODWINSSON had arrived there with a vast army, both cavalry and infantry.<sup>1</sup>

King Harald of Norway now rode round his lines to inspect the formation. He was riding a black horse with a blaze, which stumbled under him, and threw him off forwards. The king jumped quickly to his feet and said, 'A fall is fortune on the way.'

Then King Harold of England said to some Norwegians who were with him, 'Did you recognize that big man who fell off his horse, the man with the blue tunic and the beautiful helmet?'

'That was the king himself,' they said.

The king of England said, 'What a big, formidable-looking man he is: let us hope his good luck has now run out.'

### 91. 'Seven feet of ground'

TWENTY horsemen from the English king's company of Housecarls came riding up to the Norwegian lines; they were all wearing coats of mail, and so were their horses.

One of the riders said, 'Is Earl Tostig here in this army?'

Tostig replied, 'There is no denying it – you can find him here.'

Another of the riders said, 'Your brother King Harold sends you his greetings, and this message to say you can have peace and the whole of Northumbria as well. Rather than have you refuse to join him, he is prepared to give you one third of all his kingdom.'

1. It is unlikely that Harold had more than 6,000 troops, all of them infantry. The 3,000-strong Royal Housecarls were reinforced by local militia called up en route for York – the so-called Select Fyrd; there were, in effect, Territorial reservists, bound by law to provide sixty days' service at a time.

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The earl answered, 'This is very different from all the hostility and humiliation he offered me last winter. If this offer had been made then, many a man who is now dead would still be alive, and England would now be in better state. But if I accept this offer now, what will he offer King Harald Sigurdsson for all his effort?'

The rider said, 'King Harold has already declared how much of England he is prepared to grant him: seven feet of ground, or as much more as he is taller than other men.'

Earl Tostig said, 'Go now and tell King Harold to make ready for battle. The Norwegians will never be able to say that Earl Tostig abandoned King Harald Sigurdsson to join his enemies when he came west to fight in England. We are united in our aim: either to die with honour, or else conquer England.'

The horsemen now rode back.

Then King Harald Sigurdsson asked, 'Who was that man who spoke so well?'

'That was King Harold Godwinsson,' replied Tostig.

King Harald Sigurdsson said, 'I should have been told much sooner. These men came so close to our lines that this Harold should not have lived to tell of the deaths of our men.'

'It is quite true, sire,' said Earl Tostig, 'that the king acted unwarily, and what you say could well have happened. But I realized that he wanted to offer me my life and great dominions, and I would have been his murderer if I had revealed his identity. I would rather that he were my killer than I his.'

King Harald Sigurdsson said to his men, 'What a little man that was; but he stood proudly in his stirrups.'

It is said that King Harald Sigurdsson composed this stanza at the time:

*We go forward  
Into battle  
Without armour  
Against blue blades.  
Helmets glitter.  
My coat of mail  
And all our armour  
Are at the ships.*

## 'SEVEN FEET OF GROUND'

His coat of mail was called Emma; it was so long that it reached below his knee, and so strong that no weapon could pierce it. King Harald then said, 'That was a poor verse; I shall have to make a better one.' He composed another stanza:

*We never kneel in battle  
Before the storm of weapons  
And crouch behind our shields;  
So the noble lady told me.  
She told me once to carry  
My head always high in battle  
Where swords seek to shatter  
The skulls of doomed warriors.*

Then the poet Thjodolf said:

*Though Harald himself should fall,  
Never shall I abandon  
The king's young heirs;  
God's will be done.  
The sun never shone  
On more promising princes;  
The two young eaglets  
Would soon avenge their father.*

## 92. The Battle of Stamford Bridge

Now the battle began. The English made a cavalry charge on the Norwegians, who met it without flinching. It was no easy matter for the English to ride against the Norwegians because of their arrows, so they rode around them in a circle. There was only skirmishing to begin with, so long as the Norwegians kept their formation. The English cavalry kept charging them and falling back at once when they could make no headway.

The Norwegians observed this, and thought the enemy assaults rather half-hearted; so they launched an attack them-

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selves on the retreating cavalry. But as soon as they had broken their shield-wall, the English rode down on them from all sides, showering spears and arrows on them.<sup>1</sup>

When King Harald Sigurdsson saw this, he led a charge into the thickest of the fighting. The battle became very fierce, and great numbers were killed on both sides. King Harald Sigurdsson now fell into such a fury of battle that he rushed forward ahead of his troops, fighting two-handed. Neither helmets nor coats of mail could withstand him, and everyone in his path gave way before him. It looked then as if the English were on the point of being routed. In the words of Arnor the Earls'-Poet:

*Norway's king had nothing  
To shield his breast in battle;  
And yet his war-seasoned  
Heart never wavered.  
Norway's warriors were watching  
The blood-dripping sword  
Of their courageous leader  
Cutting down his enemies.*

But now King Harald Sigurdsson was struck in the throat by an arrow, and this was his death-wound. He fell, and with him fell all those who had advanced with him, except for those who retreated with the royal standard.

The battle still raged fiercely, and Earl Tostig was now fighting under the royal standard. Both sides drew back to form up again, and there was a long lull in the fighting. Then the poet Thjodolf said:

*Disaster has befallen us;  
I say the army has been duped.  
There was no cause for Harald  
To bring his forces westward.  
Mighty Harald is fallen  
And we are all imperilled;*

1. This is another point where the saga account seems to echo the Battle of Hastings. It was the English at Hastings who broke formation to pursue the retreating Norman cavalry, only to be surrounded and cut down.

## THE BATTLE OF STAMFORD BRIDGE

*Norway's renowned leader  
Has lost his life in England.*

Before the fighting was resumed, Harold Godwinsson offered quarter to his brother Tostig and all the surviving Norwegians. But the Norwegians shouted back with one voice that every one of them would rather die than accept quarter from the English; they roared their war-cry, and the battle started again. In the words of Arnor the Earls'-Poet:

*It was an evil moment  
When Norway's king lay fallen;  
Gold-inlaid weapons  
Brought death to Norway's leader.  
All King Harald's warriors  
Preferred to die beside him,  
Sharing their brave king's fate,  
Rather than beg for mercy.*

## 93. Orri's battle

At this point Eystein Orri arrived from the ships with all the men he had; they were wearing coats of mail. Eystein took King Harald's banner, 'Land-Waster', and the fighting began for the third time, more fiercely than ever. The English fell in great numbers, and once again were on the point of being routed. This stage of the fighting was called Orri's Battle.

Eystein and his men had run all the way from the ships so hard that they were tired out and almost unable to fight before they arrived on the scene. But then they fell into such a battle fury that they did not bother to protect themselves as long as they could still stand on their feet. Eventually they threw off their coats of mail, and after that it was easy for the English to land blows on them; but some of the Norwegians collapsed from exhaustion and died unwounded. Nearly all the leading Norwegians were killed there.

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It was now late in the afternoon. As was to be expected, not all reacted in the same way; a number of them fled, and others were lucky enough to survive in different ways. It had grown dark before the carnage ended.<sup>1</sup>

### 94. Styrkar's escape

KING HARALD SIGURDSSON'S marshal, Styrkar, an outstanding man, managed to escape. He got hold of a horse and rode away. In the evening a cold wind blew up, and since Styrkar was only wearing a shirt with a helmet on his head and a naked sword in his hand, as his weariness wore off he began to feel cold.

Then he met a cart-driver who was wearing a fur-lined leather coat.

'Would you like to sell your leather coat, my good man?' said Styrkar.

'Not to you,' he replied. 'You're a Norwegian, I can tell that from your speech.'

'And if I were a Norwegian, what would you do about it?'

'I'd try to kill you,' said the carter, 'but as luck would have it I don't have a weapon with me that would do.'

'Then since you can't kill me,' said Styrkar, 'I must see if I can't kill you.' And with that he raised his sword and swung

1. The saga account of the battle, although immensely vivid, conflicts with the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, which is clearly more reliable. It seems that Harald of Norway never set out for York at all, but was surprised by the English army in his encampment on the east side of the Derwent. Taken unawares, the Norwegians failed to hold the wooden bridge over the river, despite an epic single-handed defence by an unnamed Norwegian giant who killed more than forty men with his battle-axe. When he was felled at last, the English army poured over the bridge and eventually overwhelmed the Norwegian army, one third of which was several miles away at Riccall, guarding the ships. All the sources agree that King Harald and Earl Tostig were killed, and that there was terrible slaughter on both sides.

## STYRKAR'S ESCAPE

it at the man's neck, slicing off his head. Then he took the leather coat, mounted his horse, and rode off down to the coast.

### 95. The Norman invasion

WILLIAM THE BASTARD, Duke of Normandy, heard that his kinsman King Edward had died, and also that Harold Godwinsson had been made king of England and crowned. William considered that he himself had a better right to the kingdom of England than Harold Godwinsson, since he was so closely related to King Edward.<sup>1</sup> William also felt he had a score to settle with Harold, who had insulted him by breaking the marriage deal with his daughter.<sup>2</sup>

Because of all this, William assembled an army in Normandy, a great number of men and plenty of ships.

On the day that he was riding from the town down to the ships, he had just mounted his horse when his wife came over to him and tried to talk to him. When he saw her, he kicked at her with his heel; his spur plunged deep into her breast, and she fell down dead at once.<sup>3</sup>

1. Duke William was the great-nephew of Queen Emma, King Edward's mother; William and Edward were second cousins. Duke William had no more claim to the throne than Harold, however, for England chose her kings by election at that time. The nearest male heir to the throne was Edgar the Ætheling, grandson of Edmund Ironside, who was still a child at the time. On the other hand, there are strong indications that King Edward the Confessor had once promised the throne to William - probably in 1051 or 1052, when William, it seems, may have visited the English court in person. King Edward often showed preference for Norman knights and churchmen during his reign; he had spent much of his twenty-five-year exile at the Norman court before succeeding to the throne of England, under the patronage of his cousin, Duke Robert, William's father.

2. All sources agree that William felt that Harold had broken his oath by taking the crown of England (cf. chapter 76).

3. There is an odd confusion here. Duchess Matilda lived in fact

## KING HARALD'S SAGA

The duke then rode off on his way to the ships.

He took his army over to England, and with him went his brother, Bishop Odo. As soon as the duke landed in England he started plundering, and subjugated the land wherever he went.<sup>1</sup>

William was exceptionally tall and strong, and a fine horseman. He was an outstanding warrior, but very cruel; he was very shrewd, but said not to be trustworthy.

## 96. The Battle of Hastings

(29) KING HAROLD GODWINSSON gave King Harald's son, Olaf, leave to return home with the remnants of the Norwegian army that had survived the battle.<sup>2</sup>

Harold then turned south with his army, for he had heard that William the Bastard had landed in the south of England and was subjugating the country. With King Harold were his brothers Svein, Gyrth, and Waltheof.<sup>3</sup>

until November 1083. But William of Malmesbury relates a story that she was scourged to death with a bridle; and Norman sources tell of William's rough wooing of her - he beat her up severely, striking her with his fists, heels, and spurs.

1. The Norman army landed at Pevensey Bay on the morning of Thursday, 28 September, three days after the Battle of Stamford Bridge, and 250 miles to the south. It is thought that he had about 500 ships and an army of some 6,000 or 7,000 troops - including about 2,000 cavalry.

2. English sources relate that Harold did not attempt to destroy the routed remnants of the army which fled back to the ships at Riccall. He summoned Olaf and the two Orkney earls, Paul and Erlend, to his presence and allowed them to leave unharmed if they swore oaths that they would never again menace England. Only twenty-four ships, of that vast fleet of nearly 300 that had brought the invasion army to England, were required to take the survivors home - a measure of the terrible carnage of that battle.

3. Waltheof was not Harold's brother (cf. chapter 75), and Svein had died several years before this. Gyrth, Leofwin, and Wulfnoth were the three brothers who fought beside Harold at Hastings.

## THE BATTLE OF HASTINGS

King Harold and Duke William met in the south of England at Hastings, where there was a fierce battle. King Harold was killed there; his brother Earl Gyrth and most of the English army also fell there. This was nineteen days after the death of King Harald Sigurdsson of Norway.<sup>1</sup>

Earl Waltheof managed to escape, and late in the evening he met a troop of William's men. When they saw the earl's men they fled into an oak-wood; there were about a hundred of them. Earl Waltheof had the wood set on fire, and they were all burned to death.<sup>2</sup> This is what the Poet Thorkel Skallason says in his *Waltheof's Poem*:<sup>3</sup>

*Waltheof burned a hundred  
Of William's Norman warriors  
As the fiery flames raged;  
What a burning there was that night!*

1. 14 October 1066. The speed with which Harold hastened to deal with the Norman threat in the south is remarkable, and may well have contributed to his defeat. He can scarcely have heard the news of William's landing on 28 September before 1 October. He forced-marched his weary army 190 miles from York to London, gathering forces as he went; paused in London to assemble an army of some 6,000 or 7,000 men; and was at Hastings, in Sussex, fifty miles farther on, by the morning of Saturday, 14 October - only nineteen days after the Battle of Stamford Bridge. There is good reason to believe that his impatience to deal with William made him leave London with only half the size of army he could have mustered; and that his precipitate march through Sussex led him to clash unexpectedly with William on ground not of his own choosing.

2. It is not likely, according to other sources, that Earl Waltheof fought at Hastings. But this episode, and the stanza that commemorates it, may well refer to events in the north of England three years later, in 1069, when King Svein Ulfsson sent a Danish army to try to conquer England. Waltheof was one of the northern leaders who joined forces with the Danes; they attacked York, which was garrisoned by the Normans, and eventually took it by storm after the town had been fired. Waltheof was prominent in the slaughter that followed.

3. Thorkel Skallason was an Icelandic Court Poet in the retinue of Earl Waltheof.

## KING HARALD'S SAGA

*William's sturdy warriors  
Lay under the paws of wolves;  
The grey beasts of carrion  
Feasted on Norman flesh.*

### 97. King William

WILLIAM had himself proclaimed King of England.<sup>1</sup> He sent a message to Earl Waltheof, offering a reconciliation, and promised him safe conduct to the meeting.

130 Earl Waltheof set out with only a few men; but when he reached the moor north of Castlebridge<sup>2</sup> he was met by two of King William's officers with a large force. They took him prisoner, and put him in shackles; later he was beheaded. He is regarded as a saint by the English.<sup>3</sup> In the words of the poet Thorkel Skallason:

*William crossed the cold Channel  
And reddened the bright swords,  
And now he has betrayed  
Noble Earl Waltheof.  
It's true that killing in England  
Will be a long time ending;  
A braver lord than Waltheof  
Will never be seen on earth.*

1. He was consecrated 'King of the English' in Westminster Abbey on 25 December 1066.

2. It is impossible to identify this place with any certainty. It could be Castleford, in Yorkshire.

3. After the Danish-inspired northern rebellion of 1069, Waltheof made his peace with King William. But in 1075, Waltheof once again joined a conspiracy of northern chieftains to overthrow King William. He withdrew from the plot at the last minute and threw himself on William's mercy; William forgave him, but never trusted him thereafter. Waltheof was tried for treason, and executed at Winchester on 31 May 1076. He was the only English leader executed by King William during his reign.

## KING WILLIAM

William was king of England for twenty-one years, and his descendants have been on the throne ever since.<sup>1</sup>

### 98. Back to Norway

OLAF HARALDSSON, the son of King Harald of Norway, took his army away from England. He set sail from Ravenspur, and reached Orkney in the autumn. There he heard the news that King Harald's daughter, Maria, had died suddenly on the very day and at the very hour that her father had been killed.

Olaf stayed in Orkney over the winter, and the following summer he sailed east to Norway, where he was proclaimed king jointly with his brother Magnus. Queen Elizabeth went to Norway with Olaf, her stepson, and so did her daughter Ingigerd.

A man called Skuli, who later came to be known as the king's foster-father, and his brother Ketil Hook also went to Norway with Olaf. The brothers were men of rank and came of a noble family in England; both of them were very shrewd men and very dear to King Olaf. Ketil Hook went north to Halogaland, where the king found him an excellent wife, and many important people are descended from him.

Skuli was an outstanding man, highly intelligent and extremely handsome. He became an officer of King Olaf's court and acted as his spokesman at public meetings and his adviser on all affairs of state.

King Olaf offered to give Skuli whatever province he wished to have, together with all the royal taxes and dues pertaining to it. Skuli thanked him for the offer, but said he would rather ask something else of him - 'For if there is a change of kings, that gift could be revoked,' he said. 'I would rather accept from you some estates that lie close to the market-towns where you, sire, are in the habit of celebrating Christmas.'

1. William died near Rouen on 9 September 1087.