

WILLIAM THE CONQUEROR

THE 1066 INVASION OF ENGLAND MARKED THE BIRTH OF TODAY'S
ROYAL LINE—AND THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE

BY EUGENE FINERMAN

LEARNING on a lectern, safe in the hindsight of history, a professor would praise the Norman Conquest of England: how it brought a superior culture to a backward island, how it forged a great nation and created a brilliant language. But any Englishman in 1066 would not have foreseen an invasion fleet of 700 ships as the gift of progress. His impression would have been of a French horde—10,000 men, 3,000 horses—with the intent of overthrowing the anointed king and replacing him with the notorious Duke of Normandy. By December 1066, this ruthless adventurer had claimed the English throne after a brilliantly planned invasion. History would respectfully call him William the Conqueror.

William's father was the Duke of Normandy but his mother was a tanner's daughter. Though the old Duke never bothered to marry his mistress, he still proved a doting father to his only son. Young William was raised at court and designated the heir to the duchy. In any other province of France—and probably in most of Europe—this line of succession would have been a scandal. But Normandy was literally the Wild West of France.

The Normans actually were Scandinavians, descended from Vikings who had overrun northwestern France. In 911 an exasperated French king made the best of a hopeless situation.

He ceded the province to the Viking chieftain, granting him the title of duke. In return for that prestigious title, the Viking warlord pledged his allegiance to the king and did promise to become somewhat of a Christian. By William's time, a century and five generations later, the Norsemen had become *les Normandes*. They now spoke French and had acquired a veneer of Gallic culture, but at heart they were still Vikings.



Great Seal of William the Conqueror

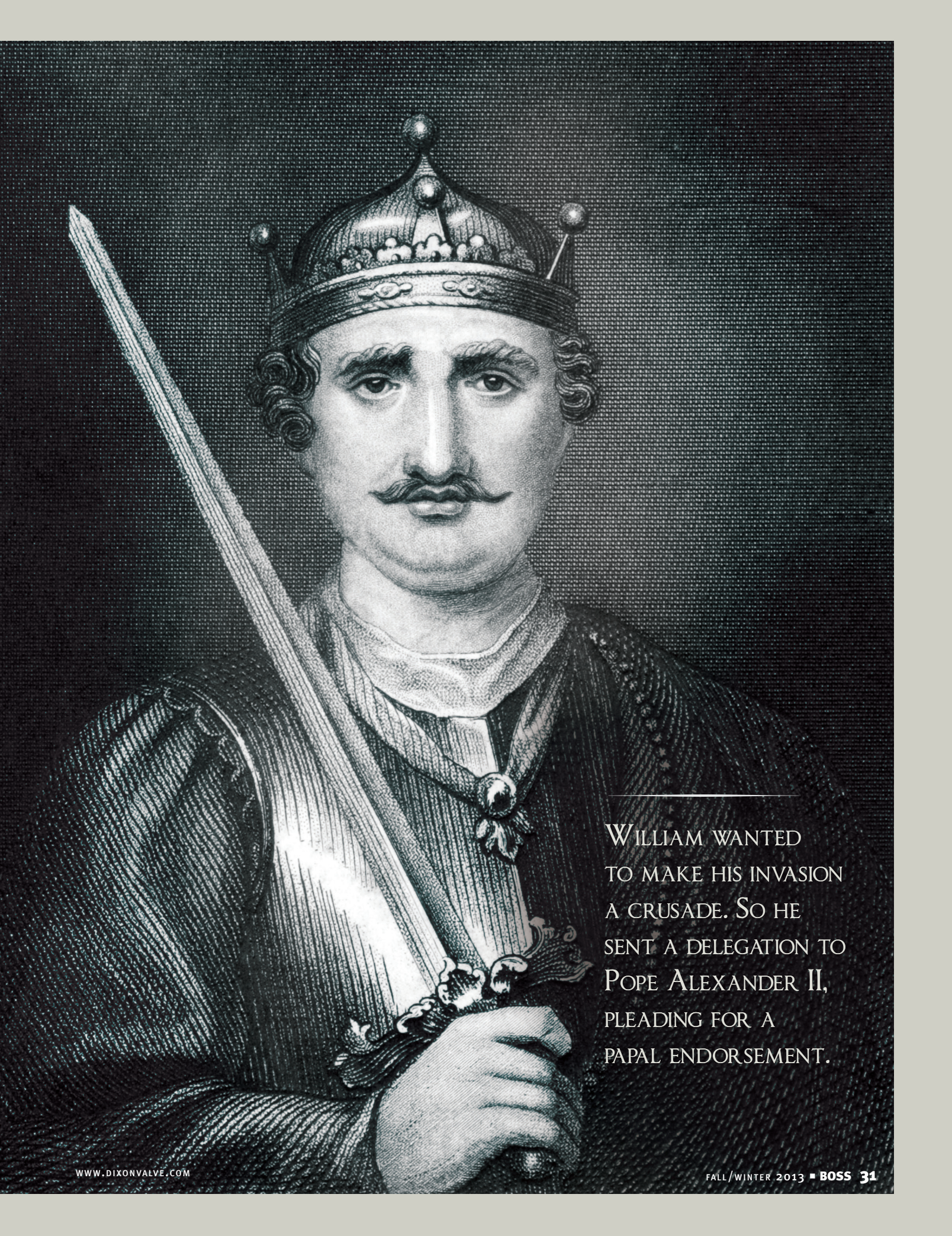
William, like his forebears, observed a deference to the King in Paris; but he had no such respect for the neighboring provinces. Brittany, Flanders and Anjou appealed to the King to stop the Norman aggression. William was only in his 20s, and he already was notorious for his military skill and his political ambition. Yet the Duke was also pragmatic. He was not prepared to fight the King, not over a few towns in Brittany. Though his ambitions were

curbed in France, he saw the chance of gaining the throne in England.

King Edward of England (ca. 1003-1066) was William's cousin. With his passive personality and religious preoccupation, Edward was more a monk than a king. In his monastic conduct, he also refrained from producing any heirs. So who would succeed the aging king? In 1051, the 23-year-old William visited his English cousin; the Duke left with the promise that he was Edward's designated heir.

Unfortunately for William, during the last decade of Edward's life, the King had given the same promise to Harold, the Earl of Wessex. The King was known to be fickle, and the tired old monk might have said anything to badgering courtiers just to be left alone. From England's perspective, Harold was already king in all but name. The Earl of Wessex governed the realm while Edward prayed.

Edward died on January 5, 1066; the following day the royal council proclaimed Harold as king and he was immediately crowned. Learning of this, William sent an ultimatum to his rival, demanding that Harold resign the throne to him. The Norman invoked not only Edward's promise but also an oath that Harold had sworn under duress. In 1063, Harold was shipwrecked on the coast of France. He found himself in William's custody, an



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intimidated guest. To earn his freedom, Harold was obliged to swear an oath of allegiance to William. The oath was made on saints' relics; so any violation would be sacrilege. Now king of England, Harold discounted the oath—but not the threat. He prepared for war.

William wanted to make his invasion a crusade. So he sent a delegation to Pope Alexander II, pleading for a papal endorsement. In the absence of English advocates, the Pope heard only the Norman side of the argument: Edward's promise and Harold's sacrilege. With the added understanding that the Church would benefit from a grateful King William, the pontiff authorized and blessed the enterprise, bestowing the Standard of St. Peter to lead the Normans into battle. Under that holy banner, William assembled an army of French mercenaries and brigands, offering these cutthroats a chance for titles and estates.

William knew the strengths and weaknesses of the English forces awaiting him. They were infantry; in close combat they wielded axes with a devastating fury. However, they were vulnerable to archery and cavalry. So William recruited archers and



A vintage color engraving from 1864 depicts the death of King Harold at the Battle of Hastings in 1066.

expected. A Norwegian army of 10,000 men had landed in northeastern England. The King of Norway had no justification for the attack; he simply was a ruthless man with an irresistible opportunity. While the English and the Normans would be killing each other in the south, he would seize the north. The Norwegian army brushed aside the

Hastings. His outnumbered infantry faced a Norman array of knights and archers. The English assembled on a ridge, a good defense against cavalry. The Norman knights who tried charging up a hill were fighting gravity as well as the axe-wielding English. However, the English were vulnerable to the Norman barrage of arrows. One struck Harold in the eye. The battle lasted through the day of October 14, and though Norman losses were heavy, the English were annihilated.

Harold's death left the English without a leader. For the clergy of England, the succession was ordained. Bearing the Pope's endorsement, William of Normandy was the rightful king. Led by its bishop, London peacefully accepted the Conqueror, who was crowned at Westminster Abbey. Not all of England was so passive, however. There would be disorganized rebellions for the next five years; they were nuisances rather than threats to William, but he savagely suppressed them. As a further precaution William constructed 35 castles in strategic positions around England. (The Tower of London began as the Norman stronghold guarding the capital.) Yet those towns and shires that accepted

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horsemen. His 2,000 knights would be the largest force of cavalry on English soil in 10 centuries, since the Roman invasion. To protect his encamped army from surprise attacks, William's fleet would also transport a prefabricated fortress; the wooden ramparts would be immediately assembled upon landing in England. This shrewdly planned invasion would require 700 ships.

Harold was waiting, his army assembled on the southern coast of England. In late September an invasion unfolded, but not the one Harold

English militia and sauntered through the countryside. So confident were the invaders that they did not even bother to wear armor. The English army, marching 185 miles in four days, caught the Norwegians unprepared with a surprise attack on September 25, 1066. The King of Norway died, as did most of his army.

But the English had no time to celebrate or rest, after news came of the Norman invasion. Harold led his tired and depleted force to the south, a march of 241 miles, to a Sussex village called



The Tower of London, one of 35 castles that William constructed.

William found him to be a just and efficient king. He established both an institution and a royal line that continues to this day.

The Norman Conquest had an even greater significance. Until 1066, English had been a Germanic language. The Conquest brought a ruling class and an occupying army that spoke French. In

languages mingled and melded. By the 14th century this pidgin hybrid had become the language of the realm, spoken alike by king and peasant. Even to our ears today it would sound vaguely familiar.

Two centuries after the Norman invasion, in the late 1500s, William Shakespeare penned these lines in

describing his country:

*This fortress built by Nature for herself
Against infection and the hand of war,
This happy breed of men, this
little world...*

*This blessed plot, this earth, this realm,
this England.*

Today this remains our portrait of England, freedom's bastion against Napoleon and Hitler. Yet, in the thousand years before Shakespeare, the island had been ravaged and enslaved by centuries of invasions. First there were the Romans, then the German barbarians, followed by the Vikings. In 1066, William of Normandy landed on England's shores.

It would be the last invasion ... and the lasting one. ■

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