

Setting the scene:

Dawn's light on 15th October 1066 revealed a bloody sight. Thousands of men lay dead upon an English battlefield only a few miles from the sea. Among the dead were a great number of the most powerful men in England. One body was that of King Harold Godwinson of England, but he was so badly cut up as to be almost unrecognisable. Moving among the dead were Norman soldiers looking for armour and weapons, and English families looking for their men. From the sea had come an invader who had staked everything on a quick and successful battle, and had succeeded against the odds. But who was this invader? And why had he come?

Background:

Some months before, on 5 January 1066, Edward the Confessor, King of England, died with no children to succeed him (no heir). This posed a major problem for the witan, the council of important men in England, which included the earls, the greatest holders of land under the king, and the most important churchmen, the bishops. Edward's nearest male relative, Edgar the Atheling, was thought too young to be king at just 14, and it was the job of the witan to find a successor and have him crowned king as quickly as possible before England fell into anarchy.

Who should become king?:

In the days and months that followed Edward's death, three men claimed that the throne should pass to them.

Harold Godwinson claimed that Edward had whispered on his deathbed that he, the most powerful earl of England and a proven warrior, should be the next to wear the crown of England. This was portrayed in the Bayeux tapestry, a 70m long cloth embroidered in the 1070s on the orders of Bishop Odo of Bayeux, half-brother of William the Conqueror. Harold is shown talking to Edward on his deathbed, perhaps about who should be the next king.

William, Duke of Normandy felt he had been robbed of his inheritance however, for he was a distant cousin of Edward the Confessor and claimed that Edward had promised, in 1052, that he should succeed him. Furthermore, in 1064, Harold Godwinson had been shipwrecked off the coast of France, captured by the local ruler Count Guy and then rescued by William. William claimed that before leaving, Harold had sworn an oath over the Norman's holiest relics (objects with religious significance) that he would support William's claim to the English throne. These relics were thought to be the bones of saints. The Duke of Normandy felt that Harold had betrayed this promise and the scene is prominently depicted in the Bayeux Tapestry, for all to see.

Finally, Harald Hardrada, King of Norway laid his claim. Harald was known for his ability as a warrior, and was nicknamed 'The Last of the Vikings'. He had the support of Tostig, Harold Godwinson's brother, who had lost his lands in England and was out for revenge. Since Viking kings had ruled England before, Hardrada began to raise forces to invade England from the north-east while Tostig took his forces and raided the English coast.