The Battle of Hastings

On 5 January 1066, King Edward the Confessor of Anglo-Saxon England died. Although he had been a good king, he failed in one vital duty—he had no son to succeed him. This created a serious problem: who would be the next king of England?

To the most powerful men in England, one candidate stood out: Harold Godwinson, Earl of Wessex. He was Edward's brother-in-law, respected by nobles, and had proved himself in battle by defeating the King of Wales in 1063. When the Witan—a council of leading nobles and bishops—met, they chose Harold as king. He was crowned at Westminster Abbey on 7 January 1066.

However, two men in Europe were furious: Harald Hardrada, King of Norway, and William, Duke of Normandy. Both believed they had a rightful claim to the English throne. William, in particular, felt betrayed, as in 1064 Harold had sworn a sacred oath in Normandy promising to support William's claim after Edward's death. Breaking such an oath was seen as a grave sin.

Harold knew William might invade but was unaware that Hardrada was also preparing to attack—with help from Harold's exiled brother, Tostig. After being banished from England, Tostig sought revenge by aiding the Norwegian king. On 18 September 1066, while Harold was preparing to defend the southern coast against the Normans, Hardrada and Tostig invaded the north.

Harold marched his army 190 miles north and met them at the Battle of Stamford Bridge on 25 September. The English were victorious, and both Hardrada and Tostig were killed. Of the 300 Viking ships that arrived, only 24 were needed to carry the survivors home. Although this proved Harold's strength as a commander, his triumph was short-lived. Just three days later, William's invasion fleet set sail from Normandy.

On 1 October, Harold learned that William had landed at Pevensey. He immediately marched his exhausted troops 190 miles back south. His army of around 7,000 included 2,000 professional soldiers called housecarls, while the rest were fyrd—untrained peasant farmers called up to fight. They had no archers or cavalry. William's well-prepared force, in contrast, arrived in 696 ships with about 7,000 men—archers, infantry, and knights on horseback.

On 14 October 1066, the two armies met at Hastings. Harold's men held the high ground behind a strong shield wall, forcing the Normans to attack uphill. Initially, the Saxons held firm and repelled the Norman assaults. But at one point, some Norman troops retreated, thinking William had been killed. When William lifted his helmet to show he was alive, his troops rallied and turned on the Saxons who had chased them downhill, surrounding and cutting them down.

This feigned retreat worked twice more, gradually weakening the English line. The final blow came with King Harold's death—most likely struck by an arrow to the eye. Leaderless, the English army broke and fled.

The Battle of Hastings was over. Duke William of Normandy was victorious. Marching to London unopposed, he was crowned King William I of England on Christmas Day 1066.

1. Who did the Witan choose to become king after Edward the Confessor's death?

2. Which two foreign leaders claimed they had a right to the English throne in 1066?

3. What was the name of the battle in which Harold defeated Harald Hardrada and Tostig?

4. On what date did the Battle of Hastings take place?

5. What does the word **"oath"** mean in the context of the text?

6. The word **"fyrd"** is used to describe part of Harold's army. What type of soldiers were they?

7. What does the term **"shield wall"** refer to in the description of the battle?

8. In the phrase "the Normans **feigned** retreat," what does **"feigned"** mean?

9. Why might Harold Godwinson's rapid march north and then back south have contributed to his defeat at Hastings?

10. How did William's tactics and army composition give him an advantage over Harold's forces during the Battle of Hastings?