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978-0-521-43076-0 - Law and Government in Medieval England and Normandy: Essays in Honour of Sir James Holt

Edited by George Garnett and John Hudson

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CHAPTER I

*Military intelligence under the Norman
and Angevin kings**J. O. Prestwich*

It is not unusual for former pupils to present a volume of essays to their old tutor in his retirement, and while I have many debts on this account, I am especially grateful to Sir James for his contribution to *War and Government in the Middle Ages* (Woodbridge, 1984) and for his labours as co-editor of that volume. It is less usual for a former tutor to be given the opportunity to repay the debt. But an offering on the subject of military intelligence under the Norman and Angevin kings between the battles of Hastings and Bouvines may seem both inappropriate and unrewarding: inappropriate because at first sight military intelligence is peripheral to the topics of government, law, and politics which Sir James has made his own; and unrewarding since it may appear that there is little to be said. One of the difficulties confronting medieval commanders was, we have been told, that 'intelligence was rudimentary', dependence on local guides being a severe handicap.¹ The older military historians had little or nothing to say about intelligence. Even Philippe Contamine, writing in 1980, though noting the opportunities for intelligence in a very mobile society, observed that the subject had long been neglected by historians.²

Nevertheless there are reasons for looking again at some scraps of evidence which have survived from this period. Some have been provided by Sir James himself. 'War', he emphasised, 'was the compulsive urgency behind administrative experiment,' and it would be a little odd if military intelligence remained rudimentary during a period when administrative measures were increasingly marked by a concern for extensive, precise, and

¹ H. A. Cronne, *The Reign of Stephen* (London, 1970), p. 39.

² *La guerre au Moyen Age* (Paris, 1980), p. 376 n. 2.

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

tested information. Moreover in his Raleigh Lecture on the end of the Anglo-Norman realm Sir James cited two pieces of evidence on military intelligence, one being Louis VII's request to the dean and treasurer of the church of St Martin in Tours for information on Henry II's intentions in 1167; the other being an intelligence report of 1227 from a citizen of Caen to Henry III.³

A second reason is that historians have recently begun to call attention to some of the evidence for intelligence activities of a more than rudimentary kind. In 1986 David Crouch, noting that Henry I had advance knowledge of the revolt which broke out in Normandy in September 1123, commented that 'spies and informers were part of the fabric of Anglo-Norman society'.⁴ In 1989 John Gillingham in his study of 'William the Bastard at War', chiefly concerned with the campaigns down to Hastings, concluded that William 'succeeded because his information was good', though he suggested that in 1057 and again in 1076 William's intelligence failed him.⁵ And, also in 1989, Matthew Strickland, considering the engagement at Alnwick in 1174 in which William the Lion was captured, argued that the surprise achieved by Ranulf de Glanville's forces showed how first-class intelligence could be decisively exploited.⁶ Even more recently Ian Arthurson has demonstrated the scale and pervasiveness of military and diplomatic intelligence in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, though some of his observations imply that it was only in the late middle ages that military intelligence became a necessity for states.⁷

A final and personal reason for this choice of subject is that a former member of Hut 3 in Bletchley Park during the second world war may be excused for asking how great a part intelligence

³ Holt, *Magna Carta*, p. 25; and his *Magna Carta and Medieval Government* (London, 1985), pp. 55, 64–5.

⁴ *The Beaumont Twins: The Roots and Branches of Power in the Twelfth Century* (Cambridge, 1986), p. 17.

⁵ *Studies in Medieval History Presented to R. Allen Brown*, ed. C. Harper-Bill, C. J. Holdsworth and J. L. Nelson (Woodbridge, 1989), p. 155 and n. 91.

⁶ 'Securing the North: Invasion and the Strategy of Defence in Twelfth-Century Anglo-Scottish Warfare', *ANS*, xii (1989), 194–6.

⁷ 'Espionage and Intelligence from the Wars of the Roses to the Reformation', *Nottingham Medieval Studies*, xxxv (1991). I am grateful to Professor Michael Prestwich for calling my attention to this article.

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Excerpt

[More information](#)*Norman and Angevin military intelligence*

3

played in the conduct of operations under the Norman and Angevin kings. Bletchley's Ultra, intelligence derived from decrypts of the German Enigma cipher, was by 1942 to give, as Ralph Bennett has written, 'access to the other side's military secrets on a scale never dreamed of by any previous belligerent'.⁸ Nevertheless the revolution inaugurated by Bletchley's cryptanalysts in 1940 and the astonishing volume of prompt and reliable intelligence which came to be produced amounted to a revolution in degree rather than in kind. Hut 3's raw material consisted of the decrypts of intercepted radio messages, but some messages were intercepted and some documents were captured in the twelfth century. Decisive as Ultra so often was, for operational purposes it had to be combined with other forms of intelligence, especially with reconnaissance from the air and on the ground. There was no difference in principle between Montgomery's personal reconnaissance of the Alam Halfa ridge immediately after he took command of the Eighth Army and William the Conqueror's personal reconnaissance of the ground directly after his landing in England at the end of September 1066.

Intelligence is not monolithic, and before considering some of the evidence for the use of intelligence in the conduct of war under the Norman and Angevin kings, it is relevant to indicate the different forms which intelligence can take. First there is what may be termed background intelligence, often overlooked but indispensable: the acquisition of a wide range of information on geographical conditions, social, economic, and political structures, customs, and personalities, providing a framework into which to fit and against which to assess items of specifically military intelligence. From one point of view Gerald of Wales provided intelligence briefings of this kind in his works on Wales and Ireland, and indeed he included specific recommendations on how those regions could be conquered and governed. Long ago Stubbs emphasised the range and volume of background intelligence available to Henry II when, as he put it, 'all nations of Europe came by envoys to his court, and his ministers, especially Richard of Ilchester and John of Oxford, ran about from one end

⁸ R. Bennett, *Ultra and Mediterranean Strategy, 1941-1945* (London, 1989), p. 15. This is authoritative, by one who served in Hut 3 for over four years. See also his *Ultra in the West* (London, 1979).

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

of Europe to the other'.⁹ Then there is strategic intelligence on the general plans and dispositions of hostile powers, especially valuable if available in time to allow counter-measures to be taken. Tactical intelligence, commonly gained by patrols and reconnaissance and from captured prisoners and documents during campaigns, is of self-evident value. But merely to collect intelligence is not enough: it has to be checked and interpreted. And in the last resort everything depends on the readiness and the ability of commanders to make effective use of intelligence. An indication of the importance attached to intelligence is given when we find measures taken against enemy intelligence: precautions of security; speed of action to nullify enemy intelligence; and schemes of deception to mislead it.

The first episode to be considered is that of the siege of Exeter in 1068. In March 1067, only three months after his coronation, William the Conqueror left England to enjoy a triumphal progress in Normandy. He returned to England early in December and celebrated the Christmas feast at Westminster. Easter in 1068 fell very early, on 23 March, and William celebrated it at Winchester. Between these two great feasts he conducted a winter campaign, besieging Exeter for eighteen days. After his army had suffered heavy losses William accepted the surrender of Exeter on terms favourable to the citizens. He then arranged for the construction of a castle at Exeter and pushed on into Cornwall before disbanding his forces and returning to Winchester. Most historians have treated this as a minor tidying-up operation and have devoted only a few lines to it.

Nevertheless there are puzzling aspects of this episode as reported by the main sources, Orderic Vitalis (who was using the lost ending of William of Poitiers), the D version of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, and the Worcester chronicle.¹⁰ Why should William have initiated a winter campaign in the south-west at a time when, as William of Poitiers tells us, disaffected Englishmen had been sending emissaries to the Danes and a Danish invasion of England was threatening?¹¹ For it was William who took the

⁹ W. Stubbs, *Seventeen Lectures on the Study of Mediaeval and Modern History* (Oxford, 1900), p. 145.

¹⁰ Orderic, II, 208–14; *ASC*, s.a. 1067; *FW*, II, 2 (referred to here as the Worcester chronicle).

¹¹ *GG*, p. 264.

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Excerpt

[More information](#)*Norman and Angevin military intelligence*

5

initiative by demanding an oath of fealty from Exeter. Why did Exeter through its leaders, *primores*, refuse to swear fealty or to admit William to the city? Dover, Canterbury, London, Stigand, Edwin, Morcar, Waltheof and many others had all submitted and done fealty. And what were the other cities, *ciuitates*, to which Exeter had sent missions urging resistance? Round had no difficulty in pouring scorn on Freeman's belief that Exeter was forming a 'civic league' of the western towns, though he did not venture to suggest which *ciuitates* Orderic may have had in mind.¹² When William approached Exeter the leading citizens, *maiores*, met him, offered to open the gates, promised full submission, and produced all the hostages he demanded. Why then did Exeter nevertheless continue to resist so long and so successfully, unmoved by the spectacle of one of the hostages being blinded? And why did Exeter finally surrender on terms because, as the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* puts it, of betrayal by the thegns? Round's view that the thegns had been 'the party of non-resistance from the first' is implausible: we should have expected the thegns rather than the citizens to have urged and led resistance. Round's conjecture that William gave favourable terms to Exeter because he was 'in sore straits', at a time when the north of England was unsubdued and the Scots and the Danes presented obvious threats, merely makes it the more puzzling that William should have ignored these dangers in favour of dealing with Exeter. Not the least puzzle is that Round should have found William's favourable treatment of Exeter to be a 'paradox' and a 'mystery', and should have stressed that his own solution was conjectural; for Round did not ordinarily deal in conjectures.

In seeking for a solution of these problems we should look first at the short account in the Worcester chronicle. This distinguishes between the citizens of Exeter and some English officers (*ministri*) who held the city. It then goes on to tell us that when Exeter fell Countess Gytha, described as the mother of King Harold and the sister of Swein king of the Danes, escaped with many men and made for Flanders, whereas the citizens negotiated a surrender to William. Gytha was in fact the aunt, not the sister, of Swein of Denmark; but the prominence given to her presence in Exeter

¹² E. A. Freeman, *The History of the Norman Conquest of England*, 5 vols. (Oxford, 1870–9), iv, 123–62; J. H. Round, *Feudal England* (London, 1895), pp. 431–55.

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

and her ultimate escape to Flanders is significant. Freeman, unlike Round, saw Gytha's importance. After the battle of Hastings Gytha withdrew to the south-west where the House of Godwin held very extensive estates, while Harold's three sons took refuge in Ireland.¹³ Gytha had experienced and recovered from an earlier crisis. In 1051 her husband, Godwin, with Gytha and three of their sons, had been exiled and had taken refuge in Flanders, while two other sons, Harold and Leofwine, had sailed to Ireland. But in the following year the family was back and restored to power, thanks to a nicely co-ordinated move, Godwin sailing from Flanders and Harold from Ireland, finally joining up in the English Channel.¹⁴ It is reasonable to surmise that Gytha hoped to repeat in 1068 what had been achieved in 1052. She had a substantial treasure, and could hope to hold her base at Exeter until Harold's sons brought reinforcements from Ireland, drawing on the naval resources of Leinster. She could appeal for wider support in England. Orderic's reference to missions sent from Exeter to other cities cannot, as Round noted, refer to little centres of population in the west country: it implies wide-reaching plans, for Orderic never applied the term *ciuitas* to anything less than a county town, commonly reserving it for the seats of archbishoprics and bishoprics. And she could hope to use her influence and her financial resources to persuade her nephew, Swein of Denmark, to launch a major expedition across the North Sea to make good his claim to the English throne.

This interpretation removes most of the difficulties presented by the accounts of this episode. Gytha and her supporters in Exeter were responsible for the original refusal of fealty, while their offer of tribute was an attempt to buy time. The readiness of the citizens to surrender as soon as William approached the city was natural, given the earlier surrenders of Dover, Canterbury and London; the continued resistance in Exeter was maintained as long as Gytha's party saw prospects of holding out until reinforcements arrived from Ireland. And the final betrayal of the city by the thegns is most naturally interpreted as referring to the decision of Gytha and her followers to escape by sea, first to Flatholme in the Bristol Channel and then to Flanders. If so

¹³ Freeman, *History*, pp. 752–4.

¹⁴ F. Barlow, *Edward the Confessor* (London, 1970), pp. 118–24.

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Excerpt

[More information](#)*Norman and Angevin military intelligence*

7

William had no reason to treat the citizens harshly, for they had offered submission and hostages at the outset.

Harold's three sons finally sailed from Ireland in the summer of 1068, too late to use Exeter as a base; and they failed to capture Bristol. Two sons returned in June 1069, landing in south Devon, but suffered a heavy defeat, and it was at this point, if Orderic is right, that Gytha gathered up her great treasure and left England for the last time. Later that summer the Danish armada sailed, and the Danes, acting in concert with their English allies, captured York.¹⁵ The Conqueror's winter campaign and successful siege of Exeter in 1068 had been a pre-emptive strike against the west country base of the Godwinesons, a strike which does much to explain the failures of Harold's sons in 1068 and 1069 and which allowed the Conqueror to concentrate his forces against the Danish force when it finally landed. It is easy now to underestimate the threat which Exeter in the hands of Gytha and her followers presented. Dr Maddicott has recently demonstrated the size and prosperity of Exeter at this time and the importance of its commercial links with Ireland.¹⁶ When Orderic reported the Conqueror's arrest of Odo of Bayeux in 1082 he put into the Conqueror's mouth the charge that Odo had been seducing the loyalty of the troops, 'whose duty was to guard England against Danes and Irishmen and other enemies', thus linking together the threats from the nearer sea power of the Irish ports and the greater sea power of Denmark.¹⁷ Moreover we are told that in 1087, after the collapse of the threatened invasion of England, the Conqueror had been contemplating the conquest of Ireland.¹⁸

Had the Conqueror's actions in 1068 been guided by good intelligence? While he was still in Normandy in 1067 he had early warning of impending trouble in England: reports reached him that the English with the help of the Danes and other barbarians were planning to inflict a major defeat on the Normans. It is possible that at this early stage William ordered a naval reconnaissance of south Devon. Orderic tells us that the men of Exeter ill-treated some knights who had been sent by William from

¹⁵ ASC, s.a. 1067–1069; Orderic, II, 224.

¹⁶ J. R. Maddicott, 'Trade, Industry and the Wealth of King Alfred', *PP*, cxxiii (1989), 17–51.

¹⁷ Orderic, IV, 42.

¹⁸ ASC, s.a. 1087.

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

Normandy and who had been driven by a storm into Exeter harbour. If these knights had taken the normal short Channel crossing they must have been blown very far indeed off their course to have fetched up off the south Devon coast. Orderic's language implies that these knights had been given a specific mission, and it is tempting to suppose that it was one of gathering intelligence about Exeter. Once William reached England he received firm intelligence about what was being planned. When Orderic reported the despatch of emissaries from Exeter to other cities, he went straight on to say that when William had definite confirmation of this (*ubi haec certius comperit*) he immediately made his demand for fealty from Exeter. Orderic's use of *certius* is significant: it implies intelligence of a high degree of reliability such as is derived from intercepted messages.¹⁹ In all this Orderic was following the lost ending of William of Poitiers who, as John Gillingham has shown, took an informed interest in the Conqueror's use of intelligence.²⁰ Much earlier in his career, when Duke William had been besieging Domfront, one of his concerns had been to intercept messages sent by the besieged garrison, and just as William of Poitiers referred to those despatched from Domfront as *in legatione directi*, so Orderic called attention to the *legationes* sent out from Exeter. Finally when William's army approached Exeter he rode ahead to make a personal reconnaissance of its defences, and, as William of Poitiers emphasised, William preferred to see for himself rather than to rely on scouts.²¹

We do not have to rely on Orderic for evidence that intelligence was assessed for its reliability. In the autumn of 1075 Lanfranc passed on to Bishop Walcher of Durham a message and instructions from the Conqueror. 'The Danes are in truth (*reuera*) coming, as the king has informed us. So', Lanfranc instructed the bishop, 'take good care to fortify your castle with men, arms and victuals.' William's intelligence was indeed sound: the Danes came in two hundred ships and raided York, but too late to support the rebellion of the earls of East Anglia and Hereford. Evidently the Conqueror had good sources in Denmark. He received early

¹⁹ Orderic, II, 208, 212–14.²⁰ *Studies for Allen Brown*, pp. 151, 155.²¹ *GG*, pp. 38, 168; Orderic, II, 212.

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Excerpt

[More information](#)*Norman and Angevin military intelligence*

9

warning of the invasion of England planned in 1085 by Cnut of Denmark in conjunction with the king of Norway and the count of Flanders, and had ample time to raise a great paid army on the continent and to ship it across to England. And he also learnt of the dispersion of the invasion fleet, enabling him to keep only reduced forces in England during the winter of 1085–6.²²

The Conqueror's intelligence system was not infallible. He was caught by surprise at Dol in 1076 and had to make a hasty withdrawal, suffering heavy losses in men and material. And if the Hyde chronicler is right the Conqueror long remained in ignorance of the independent and ambitious designs of Odo of Bayeux, arresting him only as he was on the point of sailing from England.²³ But the evidence cited here, combined with that assembled by John Gillingham, indicates that ordinarily the Conqueror made good use of both strategic and tactical intelligence. He understood the value of intercepted messages, which must earn him a respectful nod from one who worked at Bletchley. He was quick to pass on intelligence, as when he sent warnings about the Danes to his garrisons at York in 1069 and to Lanfranc in 1075. He relied on speed and surprise to defeat hostile intelligence, as in his night march to Alençon.²⁴ Did he also use techniques of deception? There is no reason to doubt the tactic of the feigned flight at Hastings, and, as Allen Brown showed, there are several other instances of the use of this manoeuvre in this period.²⁵ Stenton thought that there was 'a touch of fiction' in the report that in 1085 William ordered Englishmen to shave their beards and adopt Norman garb in order to deceive the Danes.²⁶ But the story at least shows that William was thought capable of such measures; and in the next generation Louis VI seized Gasny disguised as a monk with his retinue of knights dressed in black cowls.²⁷ Gerald of Wales took pride in reporting the successful stratagems of his grandfather, Gerald of Windsor, when besieged

²² *The Letters of Lanfranc Archbishop of Canterbury*, ed. and tr. H. Clover and M. Gibson (Oxford, 1979), no. 36; ASC, s.a. 1075, 1085; FW, II, 18.

²³ *Liber monasterii de Hyda*, ed. E. Edwards (RS, 1866), p. 296.

²⁴ GND, VII, 8, ed. Marx, p. 126.

²⁵ R. Allen Brown, 'The Battle of Hastings', *ANS*, III (1980), 16.

²⁶ Stenton, *English Feudalism*, p. 150, n. 2.

²⁷ Orderic, VI, 184.

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

at Pembroke by the Welsh in 1096 and on the point of being forced by famine to surrender. The garrison's last four flitches of bacon were flung out to give the impression that there were ample stocks of victuals in the castle; and Gerald of Windsor then arranged for a message to fall into the hands of the Welsh in which he declared that he could hold out for another four months.²⁸ It would be agreeable to think that this was the inspiration for Operation *Mincemeat* in April 1943, described as perhaps the most successful single deception operation of the second world war; but, as Sir Michael Howard observed, the idea of planting on the enemy the body of a courier carrying misleading plans of future operations is probably as old as war itself.²⁹

Henry I's intelligence came to be feared by his opponents. But his reign began with a failure.³⁰ When late in June 1101 reports of the intended invasion of England by Robert Curthose were confirmed, Henry assembled his army at Pevensey Bay, since he took it as certain that the invading forces would land in that region. Perhaps, as Hollister suggested, that confidence was based on specific intelligence. If so the reports were premature or even the product of a deception plan, for Ranulf Flambard, who was directing the invasion, had some English sailors suborned and used them to pilot the invading fleet to make an unopposed landing at Portsmouth. In any case Henry should have provided against the possibility that Flambard would make for the port nearest to Winchester and would seize the treasure. No one knew the importance of the Winchester treasure better than Flambard, and both Rufus and Henry himself had made straight for the Winchester treasure before their coronations. But in practice Robert Curthose failed to exploit the surprise of his landing. He delayed, turned aside from Winchester, and when confronted by Henry's army renounced his claim to the English throne in return for a promised annuity of £2,000.

Robert Curthose should have understood the importance of intelligence and surprise, for just two years earlier in August 1099 he had taken part in the battle of Ascalon in which the crusaders

²⁸ Giraldus Cambrensis, *Opera*, ed. J. F. Dimock *et al.*, 8 vols. (RS, 1861–91), vi, 90.

²⁹ *British Intelligence in the Second World War* (London, 1990), v, 89.

³⁰ For a full discussion of this episode see C. Warren Hollister, 'The Anglo-Norman Civil War: 1101', in his *Monarchy, Magnates and Institutions in the Anglo-Norman World* (London, 1986).