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## Prologue: Studying the Age of William the Conqueror

‘That the history of England for the last eight hundred years has been what it has been has largely come of the personal character of a single man [...], and that man was William, surnamed at different stages of his life and memory, the Bastard, the Conqueror, and the Great’.<sup>1</sup> Writing in 1888, Edward Augustus Freeman, Regius Professor of Modern History at the University of Oxford, made it his ‘special business’ to furnish his readers with an account of English history viewed through the deeds and character of a single man whom he deemed one of the greatest statesmen of all time.<sup>2</sup> For Freeman and many of his colleagues, history was fundamentally a matter of statesmanship, written and wrought by the acts of great men and determined by their personality and character. An altogether different mentality was expressed by Freeman’s close contemporary, Karl Marx, who opened his *Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* with the observation that ‘human beings make their own history, yet they do not make it at will in circumstances chosen freely, but in the circumstances in which they find themselves, which are dealt to and inherited by them’.<sup>3</sup> Produced in 1851/52 following Marx’s permanent move to London, the essay reminded its readers of a fact easily forgotten when studying the course of human history, be that the Napoleonic era investigated by Marx or the age of William the Conqueror that forms the subject of both Freeman’s tome and the present volume: namely that people – note that the German term *Menschen* (‘humans’) used by Marx actually includes both men and women, whereas most English translations give the gender-specific term ‘men’;<sup>4</sup> *traduttore traditore* – are products of their time, and that in making their own history they are themselves subject to the cultural environment within which they are born, raised, and educated. In

a sense, the words quoted above can be considered, without too much generalisation, as promoting a contextual view that focuses less on individuals and more on the world they inhabit(ed). Adopting this perspective, this study companion offers a cultural and contextual history aimed primarily – but not exclusively – at university-level students wishing to advance their knowledge and understanding of some of the wider cultural, political, social, religious, ideological, economic, linguistic, and educational backgrounds during the age of William the Conqueror.

Especially when studying the distant past, there can be a risk of condensing complex historical cultures into seemingly straightforward narratives revolving around individuals and their achievements, and these *dramatis personae* are, just as they were for Freeman, typically men. These views reflect nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century imaginations of history written by ‘great men’ (Marx’s aforementioned intervention notwithstanding) much more than they do current scholarly practice,<sup>5</sup> yet their echoes can be detected even in some of the most recent publications inside and outside academia. These heroes of the ‘Dickensian schoolroom’,<sup>6</sup> to borrow one critic’s expression, appear to be making something of a comeback at this volume’s time of writing, when the popular(ised) (hi)stories of their exploits seem to be gaining currency once again in the context of present-day identity politics, culture wars, and diplomatic showmanship.<sup>7</sup> This is not the approach to history that underpins the present volume, however, and calling it a *Companion to the Age of William the Conqueror* (rather than a *Companion to William the Conqueror*) deliberately shifts the focus away from the man himself and onto the history, culture, and society of ‘his’ age. This choice of wording does not imply a possessive quality (as in ‘William’s age’ or ‘the age belonging to William’), but rather will serve as a shorthand for describing the world into which William was born in 1027/28,<sup>8</sup> in which he grew up, some parts of which he came to rule and conquer at the same time as having to abandon his claim to others, and which he left behind upon his death in 1087. And though there is no doubt that William’s own actions helped shape and change, for better or worse, the world he inhabited in significant and enduring ways, in the end this was not the age created by William, but the age that created him – *non nascitur saeculum a Guillelmo, sed parit saeculum Guillelmum*.

Indeed, William’s most eminent modern biographer made some imperative suggestions to that very effect in a thoughtful article

published in 2018, proposing that a book be written on the Conqueror and his times that ‘will be very wide-ranging and treat of the themes of diversity, gender, identity, cultural transfer, migration, national, regional, local and individual experience and change’, and which ‘must certainly be located within the history of Europe and the North Sea World and must start from the widely accepted conclusion that Normandy and England were participants in the political [and, one might add, social and religious] culture that was prevalent throughout the post-Carolingian medieval west’.<sup>9</sup> William’s life, we are told, must be located within this eleventh-century world, ‘a world of profound paradoxes’.<sup>10</sup> There is nothing to object to here, and by adopting this inclusive viewpoint, the fourteen chapters in this companion aspire to assist readers in studying this fascinating and sometimes paradox period from a holistic perspective, encouraging them to cast their view beyond the history of famous individuals and injecting their studies with precisely the kind of contextual and comparative knowledge that, though absolutely vital to our modern understanding of the medieval past, continues to be placed at risk by recent trends in secondary and, increasingly, tertiary education.

Like all study companions, the present book cannot claim to be exhaustive. Decisions had to be made, some tougher than others, as to which topics could reasonably be covered within the available space, and which ones could not, without wishing to imply that the subjects not represented in the final selection are any less deserving of study. Likewise, in setting the overarching chronological and geographical parameters for the volume – a decision that always involves a degree of arbitrariness – the central aim was to enable and facilitate coherent and comparative analyses across the chapters, even if this meant having to apply cut-off points that would exclude certain events and locations which might well have been of interest to the reader. Luckily, these decisions were made easier by, on the one hand, the helpful advice of the anonymous reader(s) who generously and thoroughly reviewed the full manuscript prior to its publication, and, on the other hand, the existence of several excellent handbooks and study companions that cover some of the subjects excluded here and/or extend their chronological coverage into periods that lie outside the scope of the present volume.<sup>11</sup> Rather than entering into competition with them, this volume aims to continue the scholarly conversation by deliberately placing its main emphasis elsewhere so as to complement existing research without

duplication. By the same rationale, the chapters in this companion do not rehearse the details of William the Conqueror's life and career,<sup>12</sup> nor are they concerned with the minutiae of his cross-Channel invasion of 1066 or the Battle of Hastings.<sup>13</sup> Readers wishing to familiarise themselves with the history of the Normans and their activities in different parts of Europe (and beyond) are served very well by a range of informative entry-level publications that not only set out the broader historical developments without succumbing to undue generalisations, but which also include helpful supplementary materials such as timelines, maps, genealogical tables, and concise introductions to the most frequently cited primary sources.<sup>14</sup> Rather than duplicating these well-designed *aides-mémoires* here, I encourage readers to consult them in their existing form. Those seeking even more extensive prosopographical and cartographic data from across the European map can turn to a range of accessible reference works and atlases.<sup>15</sup> To facilitate and guide independent research, recommended readings suitable for university students have been compiled for each chapter in this companion by their respective authors, and they are highlighted in the bibliography at the end of the volume.

Having set out briefly what the present companion does *not* do, it is now time to introduce the volume's organisational structure and its fourteen chapters. In terms of chronology, the 'age of William the Conqueror' is defined here as the period of William's life (c. 1027/28–87) plus a quarter century either side – in other words, the eleventh century.<sup>16</sup> It is within the confines of these 100 or so years that most of the discussions offered throughout this book find their primary locus, and only very occasionally, and where absolutely necessary, are excursions made into earlier and/or later centuries. Geographically, too, the companion's primary focus lies with the 'core' territories that William inhabited, ruled over, and is known to have visited (peacefully or otherwise) in his lifetime – in the first instance, Normandy, its neighbouring principalities, and England – before expanding the view to other regions with close cultural, political, linguistic, literary, and religious connections to the Norman duchy and the post-Conquest Anglo-Norman realm, namely Scandinavia and the North Sea World, the insular world beyond the English Channel, and further parts of Continental Europe beyond northern France. These territories and their mutual relationships are the subjects of the first three chapters authored by Alheydis Plassmann, Alex Woolf and Neil McGuigan, and Michael

Gelting, and together they constitute Part I: Home and Away. Southern Italy, Sicily, and the Holy Land – three regions that witnessed significant Norman colonisation and conquest during the later eleventh and twelfth centuries – are not given equally explicit treatment here, but their history is readily accessible elsewhere thanks to a rich, ongoing tradition of interdisciplinary scholarship.<sup>17</sup> The themes of territory and landscape lead into Part II: Space and Society, comprising three chapters by Katherine Weikert, Richard Allen, and Eljas Oksanen dedicated to landscape and settlement, Church and society, and trade and travel, respectively. The next part of the book, Part III: Individuals and Institutions, then directs the student's view towards the social dynamics that governed eleventh-century understandings of family and kinship, nobility and aristocracy, kingship and consensus, and law and justice, with a group of four chapters written by Laura Gathagan, Daniel Booker and S. D. Church, Björn Weiler, and Emily Tabuteau. Following on from this is Part IV: Cultural Perspective, containing the book's final group of four chapters written by Matthew Strickland, Benjamin Pohl and Elisabeth van Houts, Keith Busby, and Mia Münster-Swendsen, which introduce the topics of warfare and violence, history and memory, language and literacy, and schools and education. David Bates' epilogue rounds off the many discussions offered throughout this volume with a critical reflection on the enduring legacy of William the Conqueror and his age, bringing the book full circle by complementing and underpinning this prologue's earlier remarks concerning the use (and abuse) of eleventh-century history in present-day contexts.

Last but not least, some words of explanation are needed in respect of, on the one hand, the selection of the book's contributors, and, on the other, certain topics of study that *prima facie* might strike the reader as missing from this companion's chapter structure. Beginning with the latter, there was indeed a point early on in the process of planning the book conceptually where the difficult decision had to be made as to whether to dedicate separate chapters to important subjects such as (but not limited to) colonialism, race, ethnicity, and gender. After some deliberation and helpful consultation with colleagues, a broad consensus emerged that it was preferable to treat these subjects as themes pursued across the entire volume and woven into the individual chapters organically, rather than being compartmentalised artificially and treated in isolation. Thus, the fact that they do not feature explicitly in the table of contents should not be taken to suggest that they are not an

integral part of the discussions presented in this companion. On the contrary, incorporating these themes into a range of chapters not only gives them greater prominence overall – certainly more so than could have been achieved via individual chapters – but it also serves to tie together the volume’s different sections and their contents even further, thereby achieving maximum conceptual unity and, hopefully, encouraging students to read not only specific chapters, but entire sections or – time and resource permitting – the volume as a whole. When it came to selecting and approaching the book’s contributors, key considerations (besides the obvious criteria of subject expertise and scholarly excellence) were not only the inclusion of various subject disciplines, but also a fair balance between authors of different international and linguistic backgrounds, educational systems and institutional affiliations, genders, and career stages. The result is, I hope, an inclusive, up-to-date, and forward-thinking study companion to the age of William the Conqueror that is rounded in both its design and execution, offering readers a critical introduction that is authoritative, innovative, and – as this prologue has argued – timely.

A coda: the decision to produce this companion was motivated by, on the one hand, my own experience in teaching and designing university modules on Norman history and the Norman Conquest at undergraduate and postgraduate level, not least the helpful and detailed feedback received from my students as to what sort of book they would like to be made available to them. On the other hand, it was prompted by certain educational and structural developments that in recent years could be felt ever more strongly across the university landscape and are unlikely to disappear any time soon; in fact, they may well stay with us for some time, for better or worse. Indeed, the increasing marketisation and commodification of higher education in the UK and elsewhere have brought about significant – and possibly irreversible – changes to how we teach and study in universities, how our degrees are evaluated, and how this value is perceived in the media and society more widely. Many of these changes have been transformative, sometimes implemented at breakneck speed, yet few (if any) of them have demonstrably improved the experience of our students and the quality of our degrees.<sup>18</sup> On the contrary, one of the most precarious consequences of this process – lamented by academics the world over – has been a gradual shift away from humanistic degrees offering a rounded and context-rich education and towards utilitarian models that prioritise and promise so-called

‘transferable skills’ via a streamlined, assessment-driven study experience. This is not an invention of university-level educators, of course, but rather a *modus operandi* that research commissioned in 2015 by what was then the UK’s National Union of Teachers (now incorporated into the National Education Union) found also to be pervasively in operation, and often with detrimental consequences for students’ intellectual development and mental health, across the landscape of secondary education.<sup>19</sup> Thus by the time they arrive at university, many students will have internalised learning strategies that focus on the numerically quantifiable, not the contextual, be that the prediction of exam results and grade-point averages, the emphasis on summative assessments (those counting towards a formal grading process) over formative ones (those designed to enrich and broaden the learning experience without being graded formally), or the still-popular if intrinsically flawed practice of studying and teaching Arts and Humanities subjects through quantifiable and revision-friendly ‘facts and figures’.<sup>20</sup> To be perfectly clear, none of this is to insinuate in any way that the students themselves are any less qualified today than they were at any point in the past, but merely to observe that the structures they encounter both before and after transitioning to university tend increasingly to be designed to prioritise lateral modes of learning over horizontal ones, with ‘exam-style’ assignments progressively replacing independently conducted research tasks. What this companion aims to do, therefore, is ‘buck the trend’ by offering contextual information and guidance for students wishing to embark on the exciting journey of discovery that must lie at the heart of all serious historical enquiry, explicitly encouraging them to cast their nets widely and explore the history of north-western Europe and the North Sea World in the age of William the Conqueror.

### Notes

1. Edward A. Freeman, *William the Conqueror* (London: Macmillan, 1888), p. 2.
2. Freeman, *William*, p. 4.
3. Karl Marx, *Der achtzehnte Brumaire des Louis Bonaparte*, 2nd ed. (Hamburg: Meißner, 1869), p. 1: ‘Die Menschen machen ihre eigene Geschichte, aber sie machen sie nicht aus freien Stücken, nicht unter selbstgewählten, sondern unter unmittelbar vorgefundenen, gegebenen und überlieferten Umständen’; my translation. Marx first published the work as an essay in 1852 in the periodical *Die Revolution* edited by his friend, Joseph Weydemeyer, before releasing the second edition as a stand-alone publication; a third edition was published posthumously in 1885 by Friedrich Engels.

4. For example, ‘The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte’, tr. Terrell Carver, in *Marx’s Eighteenth Brumaire: (Post)modern Interpretations*, ed. Mark Cowling and James Martin (London: Pluto, 2002), pp. 19–109; similar translations appear in non-academic publications; see, for instance, Peter Thompson, ‘Karl Marx, Part 3: Men Make Their Own History’, *The Guardian*, 18 April 2011, n. p.; Ian Kerhsaw, ‘Facts Don’t Reflect Myths of Power’, *Times Literary Supplement*, 16 January 2014, p. 26; further examples could be added without difficulty here.
5. For the period up to and including the later twentieth century, see Marjorie Chibnall, *The Debate on the Norman Conquest* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999); most recently George Garnett, *The Norman Conquest in English History, Vol. 1: A Broken Chain?* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021); also cf. Siobhan Brownlie, *Memory and Myths of the Norman Conquest* (Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer, 2013); Véronique Gazeau, ‘Imagining the Conqueror: The Changing Image of William the Conqueror, 1830–1945’, *HSJ* 25 (2014), 245–64; Rosemary Sweet, ‘The Recovery of the Anglo-Saxon Past, c. 1770–1850’, *EHR*, published online 2021, <https://academic.oup.com/ehr/article/136/579/304/6284368>.
6. Tom Licence, ‘Dickensian Angles: A “Great Man” Account of Pre-Conquest History’ [= Review of Marc Morris, *The Anglo-Saxons: A History of the Beginnings of England*], *Times Literary Supplement*, 21 May 2021, p. 26.
7. Some recent examples of this are discussed by David Bates in the epilogue of the present volume; also cf. Richard Barber, ‘The Norman Conquest and the Media’, *ANS* 26 (2004), 1–20; Donald Matthew, ‘The English Cultivation of Norman History’, in *England and Normandy in the Middle Ages*, ed. David Bates and Anne Curry (London: Hambledon, 1994), pp. 1–18.
8. On the likely date of William’s birth, see David Bates, *William the Conqueror* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2016), p. 25–26, who dates it to ‘between mid-1027 and mid-1028’ (*ibid.*, p. 26).
9. David Bates, ‘Writing about William the Conqueror’, in *1066 in Perspective*, ed. David Bates (Leeds: Royal Armouries, 2018), pp. 238–53 (p. 240).
10. *Ibid.*, p. 240.
11. Particularly *A Companion to the Anglo-Norman World*, ed. Elisabeth M. C. van Houts and Christopher Harper-Bill (Woodbridge: Boydell, 2002); *A Social History of England, 900–1200*, ed. by Julia Crick and Elisabeth M. C. van Houts (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012); the fact that these important collections of essays were published ten years apart in 2002 and 2012, respectively, makes the timing of the present volume’s publication in 2022 particularly apposite.
12. For information on these, the reader will be directed to the detailed discussions by Bates, *William, passim.*; David C. Douglas, *William the Conqueror: The Norman Impact upon England*, new ed. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1999).
13. The range of basic textbooks and introductions, both academic and popular, on these and related subjects is vast; recent examples suitable for university-level students include Jörg Peltzer, *1066: Der Kampf um Englands Krone* (Munich: Beck, 2016); Dominik Waßenhoven, *1066: Englands Eroberung durch die Normannen* (Munich: Beck, 2016); George Garnett, *The Norman Conquest: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009); Richard Huscroft, *The Norman Conquest: A New Introduction* (Harlow: Longman, 2009).
14. Particularly commendable, in this respect, are Leonie V. Hicks, *A Short History of the Normans* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2016), with generous supplementary materials in the



- form of maps, timelines, and genealogies (pp. xiv–xvii and xx–xxxviii); Marjorie Chibnall, *The Normans* (Malden: Blackwell, 2000), with maps and genealogies inserted throughout the text; David Crouch, *The Normans: The History of a Dynasty* (London: Hambledon & London, 2002), with genealogies throughout the text and an appendix of frequently cited sources and their authors (pp. 311–20); François Neveux, *A Brief History of the Normans: The Conquests that Changed the Face of Europe*, tr. Howard Curtis (London: Constable & Robinson, 2008), with maps and timelines (pp. vi–viii and 199–218); Alheydis Plassmann, *Die Normannen: Erobern – Herrschen – Integrieren* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2008), with a timeline, genealogies, and maps (pp. 315–19 and 348–50); also cf. the maps, genealogies, and primary source synopses in Huscroft, *Norman Conquest*, pp. xv–xxi and 3–20; the best anthology of relevant primary sources in English translation remains *The Normans in Europe*, ed./tr. Elisabeth M. C. van Houts (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), with many genealogical tables and maps (pp. 292–303).
15. For published maps of medieval Britain and France, see Christopher Daniell, *Atlas of Medieval Britain* (London: Routledge, 2008); Olivier Guyotjeannin, *Atlas de l'histoire de France: La France médiévale, IX<sup>e</sup>–XV<sup>e</sup> siècle* (Paris: Éditions Autrement, 2005); for genealogical tables from across medieval (and modern) Europe, see Michael F. Feldkamp, *Regentenlisten und Stammtafeln zur Geschichte Europas vom Mittelalter bis zur Gegenwart* (Stuttgart: Reclam, 2002); Klaus-Jürgen Matz, *Wer regierte wann? Regententabellen zur Weltgeschichte*, 6th rev. ed. (Munich: Deutscher Taschenbuch-Verlag, 2002).
  16. Given their shared chronological focus, the chapters in the present companion find particularly fruitful points of conversation with those recently published in *Conquests in Eleventh-Century England: 1016, 1066*, ed. Laura Ashe and Emily J. Ward (Woodbridge: Boydell, 2020).
  17. The historiography is too vast to be included here; the best starting point for students wishing to know more about Southern Italy under the Normans is Graham A. Loud, *The Age of Robert Guiscard: Southern Italy and the Norman Conquest* (London: Routledge, 2000); on Sicily, see Donald Matthew, *The Norman Kingdom of Sicily* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992); key primary sources are available in translation in Roger II and the Creation of the Kingdom of Sicily, ed./tr. Graham A. Loud (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2012); for some recent perspectives and reassessments, cf. the contributions in *Rethinking Norman Italy: Studies in Honour of Graham A. Loud*, ed. Paul Oldfield and Joanna Drell (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2021); recent comparative research on the Normans in the Holy Land includes Ewan Johnson and Andrew Jotischky, 'South Italian Normans and the Crusader States in the Twelfth Century', in *The Normans and the 'Norman Edge': Peoples, Politics and Identities on the Frontiers of Medieval Europe*, ed. Keith Stringer and Andrew Jotischky (London: Routledge, 2020), pp. 148–61, as well as Alan Murray's discussion of the principality of Antioch and its nobility (pp. 162–90) and Keith Stringer's reflections on Norman expansion into 'outer Europe' (pp. 219–83) published in the same volume.
  18. For a recent and intelligent critique, see Tom Sperlinger et al., *Who Are Universities For? Re-Making Higher Education* (Bristol: Bristol University Press, 2018). For a critical assessment of the situation in the US, with some pertinent parallels in the UK, see now Ronald G. Musto, *The Attack on Higher Education: The Dissolution of the American University* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022).

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19. Merryn Hutchings, *Exam Factories? The Impact of Accountability Measures on Children and Young People* (London: National Union of Teachers, 2015), [www.researchgate.net/publication/309771525](http://www.researchgate.net/publication/309771525).
20. A recent report commissioned by the Higher Education Policy Institute (HEPI) and published on 23 September 2021 with the title ‘The Humanities in Modern Britain: Challenges and Opportunities’ even went so far as to argue that embedding ‘professionally valuable’ skillsets such as numerical education in Humanities degrees would greatly enhance their graduates’ employability; [www.hepi.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/The-Humanities-in-Modern-Britain-Challenges-and-Opportunities.pdf](http://www.hepi.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/The-Humanities-in-Modern-Britain-Challenges-and-Opportunities.pdf).