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The Location of the Battle of Hastings

Abstract

In this essay, I tried to find the exact location of the Battle of Hastings. In the first part, I have examined the different theories about the location of the battle. After this, I have examined the different pieces of information in the chronicles and, with them, found the most probable place where it happened. Moreover, I used the events of another battle to strengthen my theory. Finally, I closed my essay with my conclusion.

Keywords: William the Conqueror, Battle of Hastings, England

Introduction

In this essay I would like to determine the exact location of the Battle of Hastings. The title can be tricky, because the battle was named after Hastings, therefore everybody says that the battle was fought near there. However, after my research I would say that we don't know exactly where did it actually happen. The traditional view is that this event had taken place at a settlement which was named after the battle. In the exact place, the monks erected an abbey, which was received the name Battle Abbey. Its high altar was placed on the spot where Harold (I) (Godwinson) was killed. The monks had written the story of the foundation in the *Chronicle of the Battle Abbey* in order to verify their rights against the king who demanded that the abbey should pay their taxes. The text claims that William made an oath that if he wins the battle, he will erect an abbey on the exact place where it was fought.² The story could be true, however, two different circumstances contradict that story. First, in the *Chronicle of the Battle Abbey* there are mistakes which can be disproven with other contemporary chronicles. Second, researchers couldn't find any object which can be related to the battle. The English Heritage website³ said that because these objects lay deep in the ground, we couldn't find them. Or these were destroyed by

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² SEARLE 1980: 36–37.

³ You can find many information about the Abbey here: www.english-heritage.org.uk/visit/places/1066-battle-of-hastings-abbey-and-battlefield/history-and-stories/battle-of-hastings-location/

erosion. However, the soil of the Battle Abbey and its surrounding area were used vigorously in order to evolve Battle Abbey and the settlement which was named after the Battle. When the abbey was built on the top of the hill, its upper part was cut off to create the foundation of the abbey. It means that the monks found dead bodies and weapons, but *The Chronicle of The Battle Abbey* did not mention this. A television documentary, Time Team, tried to find the location of the battle. They thought that the battle was fought in a roundabout which lies 100 m away from the Abbey. However, the presumed place is the centre of the settlement, and there were huge construction works. This means that they should have found something when they made tunnels, roads, etc. Maybe the lack of evidence means that we have to search for the location elsewhere. Many locations have been suggested as possible battle sites (Crowhurst, Caldbec Hill),⁴ but I think they did not suit for the battlefield either. Thus, I had to reread the different chronicles, books about the battle and inferred from them to the topography, which can help to determine the exact place. Furthermore, I had used the maps of the recreated topography of the landscape of East Sussex, which really helped me to create my own theory. I have used former articles about archeological findings in the region, and finally I reckon that I could determine the location of the battle. My article was built as follows; In the first part I would like to examine the different theories on the locations of the battle. In it, I will involve three locations: Battle, Caldbec Hill and Crowhurst. In my opinion, Battle is the most probable location for the event, however it is not perfect. Therefore, I would like to offer another possibility. In the next part, I examine the different types of information that helped me finding the place of the battle.

I have used mostly geographical objects (sea level, the topography of the battlefield etc.). After I examined all of the evidences, I will show where the battle was fought. In the last part, I will compare the events of the Battle of Hastings with the events of the Battle of Dyrrachium. My opinion is that the comparison is helping in verifying my theory further. I will close this article with my conclusions where I summarise my findings.

Possible locations

You can be surprised that the battle has different locations. Many scholars accepted that the battle was fought in the vicinity of the settlement, which received its name after the event (Battle). The first mention of it came from William of Jumièges who writes that after the battle, the location on which it was fought received the name Battel.⁵ *The Chronicle of the Battle Abbey* tells the story of the foundation of the abbey on the battlefield. It says that when William put on his chainmail, and the Norman army prepared for the battle, he made a vow that if he won, he would erect an abbey in the exact place where the victory was made. This vow was listened by a monk who helped William in the preparations, and he and his brothers built the monastery later.

⁴ BBC 2013.

⁵ HOUTS 2003: 173.

The creation of the abbey was difficult, says the chronicle, because the monks first made their homes in a place that was north of the location of the battle. Its name was Herste. However, William demanded that an abbey had to be built on the exact place where the fight was won. The monks tried to insist because there wasn't any water or stone in the place where they had to build up the abbey. However, miraculously they found water, and William sent them stones from Normandy, and they could build Battle Abbey.⁶

The story could be true. In the area, there could be a tradition that the battle was fought there. And the kings or military leaders of that time usually made crosses, churches or some religious monuments to commemorate their victory and ask God's forgiveness because of the Christian victims.⁷ For example, Ladislaus (I) has the monastery of Mogyoród built in order to commemorate his victory over the Hungarian king Salamon (I).⁸ This could be the case in Battle as well because the abbey was built with the same purpose as the monastery of Mogyoród. However, due to the lack of archaeological finds, the possibility of the site is reduced. I can't accept that nothing was found on the battlefield. As I mentioned earlier, the site was exposed to significant field works, which transformed the topography of the place. For example, to build the abbey, the hilltop had to be reduced significantly, and the ground was flattened. During this work, they should have excavated some of the artefacts or bodies lying in the same place.⁹

It is known that William left the dead bodies of the fallen Anglo-Saxon troops in the field because he possibly wanted to eliminate any future resistance and to punish the enemy because they dared to challenge him in combat. It is probable that the bodies of Hastings were buried lately, however, I doubt it. We know that William buried his troops after the battle, and Harold as well, but in that age, it was common to leave the defeated troops where they were killed.¹⁰ Orderic Vitalis wrote that after the Battle of Stamford Bridge, the remains of the fallen could be seen on the battlefield.¹¹ Therefore, if the abbey was built on the same place where Harold has fallen, the dead bodies of the Anglo-Saxon troops should be found. However, we didn't find any information about it. Moreover, no artifacts relating to the battle have been found.

Furthermore, *The Chronicle of the Battle Abbey* contains some information, which can't be verified by other contemporary sources. First, it mentions that after William landed at Pevensey, he set the ships on fire to prevent his army from fleeing from England.¹² However, William of Poitiers denies this claim because he says that when Harold sent envoys to William, he was inspecting the guards of the ships.¹³ Also, the chronicle mentions that William had another camp near the battlefield,

⁶ SEARLE 1980: 37–47.

⁷ HERN 2017: 161–185.

⁸ GERÉB et al. 1964: 89. However, we don't know exactly where this monastery was. The abbey of Mogyoród was consecrated for Saint George, but Ladislaus made a vow to build a church at the hill of Mogyoród, which was consecrated for Saint Martin. Therefore the two abbeys weren't the same at all.

⁹ See: www.english-heritage.org.uk/visit/places/1066-battle-of-hastings-abbey-and-battlefield/history-and-stories/battle-of-hastings-location/

¹⁰ POITIERS 1998: 143.

¹¹ VITALIS 1969: 169.

¹² SEARLE 1980: 35.

¹³ POITIERS 1998: 117.

and the vow was made there.¹⁴ However, William Poitiers set this event at Hastings,¹⁵ and *The Carmen*, an other contemporary source mentions two camps. The first was a beachhead, and the text says that William occupied another camp where he could defend his ships with ramparts. It is highly probable that this camp is Hastings, and *The Carmen* says that William received and sent envoys from there. The envoy he sent came back to him from Harold to there because *The Carmen* doesn't mention that William changed his camp.¹⁶ It means that before the battle, William had two camps, one in Pevensey and one in Hastings.

Moreover, *The Carmen* and other sources mention that Harold wanted to catch William unawares, like Harald Hardrada and his Viking army before him, at Stamford Bridge.¹⁷ William was informed about this, and he doesn't let his troops out of his camp for foraging. The example of Stamford Bridge shows that you can catch an enemy unawares, if they did not count on it. So Harold probably didn't want to attack William at his camp but when he was marching. That is why William created his battle order at his camp in Hastings, because he didn't want to make this happen. And the Anglo-Saxons then chose to fight a battle on the top of the hill, and it is probable that they tried to ambush the Normans from there.

Moreover, there is a problem with the battle interpretation as well. *The Chronicle of Battle Abbey* knows only one feigned retreat,¹⁸ while William of Poitiers counts three,¹⁹ and *The Carmen* two.²⁰ We don't know how many times William's troops made this manoeuvre, but they have done this more than one time. Therefore, the author of the *Chronicle* tried to make a summary, however, he lost many details, which can prove its authenticity. The *Chronicle* therefore only shows the vow of William as a proof of the creation of the Battle Abbey and tries to support this claim with miracles, which can help in the building of the Abbey. However, there is little geographical information, which can be useful in the determination of the battlefield. The *Chronicle* mentions a place name Herste, which means the Woods and a trench, which is called Malfosse by the Normans.²¹ There are many places in East Sussex that contain the word Herst, because these places lie in the Weald area. The Weald is a huge area, which consists of contiguous forests; therefore, the settlement's name contains the word Herst. However, the question of the Malfosse is very interesting because it was not found beyond chance. There are many suggestions about different geographical objects, which can be the exact ditch where William lost many of his horsemen.²² However we don't have any proof about them. In searching for the Malfosse, I have found the perfect spot where I think the battle was fought, but I will show it later. My conclusion is that there can be an original tradition behind the case of Battle Abbey, but because there isn't any proof that can confirm this, we should examine

¹⁴ SEARLE 1980: 37.

¹⁵ POITIERS 1998: 117, 125–127.

¹⁶ AMIENS 1998: 17, 19, 21, 23.

¹⁷ MORRIS 2013: 195–197.

¹⁸ SEARLE 1980: 39.

¹⁹ POITIERS 1998: 129–133.

²⁰ AMIENS 1998: 27.

²¹ SEARLE 1980: 39, 42–43.

²² HOUTS 2003: 169.

other theories. This doesn't mean that the Chronicle of the Battle is wrong, but the lack of evidence suggests that we might look for the battlefield elsewhere (Figure 1).

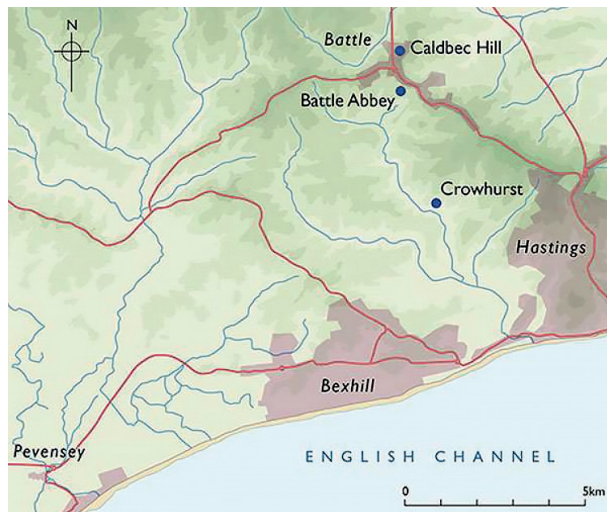


Figure 1: Possible locations of the Battle

Source: www.english-heritage.org.uk/visit/places/1066-battle-of-hastings-abbey-and-battlefield/history-and-stories/battle-of-hastings-location/

The other possible candidate is Crowhurst, which is the nearest place to Hastings. The theory was made by Nick Austin. He thought that the monks built the original abbey at Crowhurst then they moved it to Battle, where the Abbey was created. His translation of the Chronicle of the Battle Abbey says that the little dwellings in which the monks lived before the Abbey were built at Crowhurst. He also found several building foundations at Crowhurst under Court Lodge. He presumes that these buildings could be the original buildings of an abbey, so they are marking the exact place where Harold was killed.²³ We don't know accurately that these buildings were traditionally related to any church building, and there isn't any local tradition which says that the battle was fought there. Moreover, nobody called Crowhurst Herste, and the Domesday Book mentioned it as Croherste. However, he didn't interpret the chronicle correctly. The document says that the monks first made their houses west from the original site. Then William ordered them to make the abbey at the right place. If we compare this with the theory of Nick Austin, we can see the difference. He says that the monks wanted to settle first at the right place, then they moved to another spot.

But the Chronicle knows it differently. It says, that the monks didn't want to erect a monastery in the right place because they couldn't find any resources which are needed for monastic life. They couldn't find water, or stones for building, and they couldn't

²³ HERN 2017: 195.

make the labours, which are important to the monks.²⁴ The Chronicle emphasises the miracle that helped the monks build the abbey. Therefore, Austin's theory is wrong. He found some artefacts on the field and he said that these belonged to the Norman army, but these were so deformed that we don't know what their purpose was.²⁵ He also claimed that the village was so damaged at the Norman Conquest that this can be a proof that the battle was fought there.²⁶ However, the Normans were pillaging when they arrived in England. These activities continued from Hastings as well.²⁷ They wanted to make Harold march against William and fight a battle with him. William knew that if they had to spend the winter in England, they would starve and lose the war. This means that he had to wage a battle as soon as he landed in England. Many sources said that Harold wanted to move against William immediately, so William's strategy worked.²⁸ The king didn't listen to his counselors who wanted to persuade him to remain in the capital. Thus, the destroyed settlements go hand in hand with the Norman warfare, and it doesn't mean that a battle was made near to them. It means that Normans foraged it and took some food from the locals. This fact can't be used to validate the theory of Crowhurst, so I examined the case of Crowhurst as well, and I don't think that the battle was fought there.

There is another claimant to the battlefield; it's Caldbec Hill. If you see the possible candidates on Figure 1, it is near Battle, the original battle site. Caldbec Hill is higher than the monastery hill of Battle. Therefore, it could be ideal for the battle because Harold maybe fought on a higher ground than William. Some historians also claim that at Caldbec Hill there was a hoary apple tree where the different units of Harold's army were assembled and then they marched against William.²⁹ There may be a landmark there known to Harold and the locals as a gathering place where the king assembled his troops. After the assembly they moved to Battle Hill where the battle could be fought. Moreover, the *Orderic Vitalis* mentions a name of a place, Senlac, which can possibly mean 'sandlake'.³⁰ My sources link the name with a hill, which can mean Battle Hill or Caldbec Hill. Jim Bradbury in his book about the Battle of Hastings states that there was a pool at Oakwood Hill that can be the mysterious Senlac.³¹

Moreover, he believes that the forested landscape which was mentioned in the different sources points to the Caldbec Hill location. Also, the supporters of the Caldbec Hill theory say that the ditch where the Norman horses fell was made by the Anglo-Saxons themselves, and the hill was narrower; therefore, it was an ideal place for the English forces to make a shield wall and stop the attacks of the Normans. Harold could have used the hill in order to blockade William, and if he lost, he could have raised another army against the Normans.³²

²⁴ SEARLE 1980: 43–45.

²⁵ KELLY 2011.

²⁶ Crowhurst, Domesday Book: <https://opendomesday.org/place/TQ7512/crowhurst/>

²⁷ MORRIS 2013: 228.

²⁸ AMIENS 1998: 13.

²⁹ HERN 2017: 200.

³⁰ VITALIS 1969: 173.

³¹ BRADBURY 2021: 131–134.

³² HERN 2017: 201.

However, the chronicles don't mention that the Malfosse was made by the Anglo-Saxons. These mostly show that the Normans didn't know about it and fell with their horses. *The Chronicle of the Battle Abbey* describes this object but can't decide that this was a natural or a man-made ditch.³³ Moreover, the name of Senlac could mean different things. It can be described as Scean-Leagh, beautiful meadow, or Isen-Laco, Iron ponds. Therefore, we don't know for sure what Orderic Vitalis wanted to say with it. I doubt that the name has any connection with the nearby hills. There is a possibility that it means Sanguie Lake or Bloody Lake, because a nearby lake was filled with the blood of the Anglo-Saxon soldiers.³⁴

We don't know either if there was any sign of an assembly point at Caldbec Hill. It is evident that the apple trees were used as border signs between different types of estates, but I didn't find any evidence that Caldbec Hill was one of them. Because of these uncertainties, I doubt that Caldbec Hill can be a real candidate for the Battle of Hastings. There is not any real evidence about it, and the different authors only guess with the use of different types of information. Therefore, we can't rely on their theory.

Our theory about the location of the battle

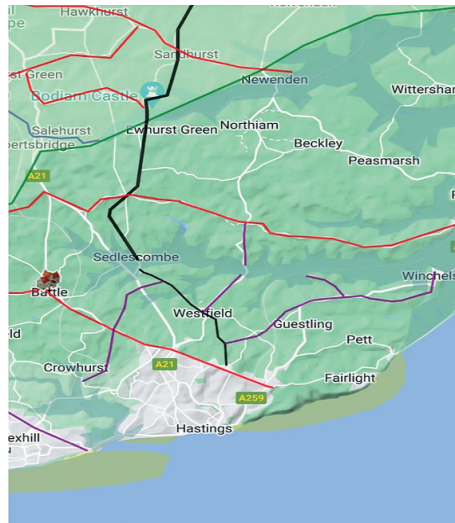


Figure 2: The landscape in 1066
 Source: https://saxonhistory.co.uk/Battle_of_Hastings_1066AD_Landscape.php

I chose Figure 2 to show how different the landscape was in 1066. As you can see, the area around Hastings was a peninsula. It was cornered by the sea from three angles and it was joined to the mainland by a little corridor. William chose this location as

³³ SEARLE 1980: 39, VITALIS 1969: 173; HOUTS 2003: 169; POITIERS 1998: 139.

³⁴ FREEMAN 1869: 743–751.

his headquarters, and from it he guided the first part of his campaign. On the left side of Figure 2 you can see Battle, the traditional site of the battlefield. You can see different types of lines which were roads that were built by the Romans. There were main roads, different types of tracks and trails which were used in the Roman times.

In this part, I would like to speak about the different types of information, which can help us to localise the battlefield. I have found them in different chronicles, and some authors have mentioned them as well. These are essential in making our conclusions about the place of the battle. In the next part, I will show you not just the different geographical features of the battlefield but also go into details about the description of the events of the battle as well. I have found much hidden information, which can also help me find the battlefield.

Sea

If you look Figure 3 closely you can see that the isthmus, which nowadays is called East Sussex, looked very different in 1066. The sea level was really high at that time, and it penetrated deep into the mainland.³⁵ Little islands and different types of peninsulas were created which opened the door to building some ports and docks in the nearby area of Hastings.



Figure 3: Cinque Ports
 Source: https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Kent_Cinque_Ports.svg

³⁵ HERN 2017: 78.

Figure 3 also shows the geography of South England. As you can see, the sea flooded a huge area, and the different rivers also created huge bays as well. We can see Pevensey, where William landed, and Hastings, where he made his headquarters.

In 1066, the sea level was high; therefore, in the south many places were sea-covered. It created bays in Pevensey where William started his campaign and further east where the river Romney made a huge bay, which can be seen on Figure 3. After two hundred years, the sea withdrew and the bay at Romney ceased to exist due to a huge storm. Therefore, the sea made a huge impact on William's invasion as well.³⁶

There are two sources, which speak about the sea as well. First, we have *The Carmen*, which mentions it a few times; therefore it can help to determine the battlefield as well. *The Carmen* says that after William managed to arrive in England, he first seized a safe beachhead (Hastings), and then he made it a fortified port. The locals have seen his arrival, and a messenger informed Harold about it. We also hear that Harold wanted to catch William unawares and not just planned a land attack but tried to cut off William's possible escape route on the sea as well. He mobilised 500 ships to do that.³⁷

The next time we are reading about the sea is when William's soldiers ran away after the failed feigned retreat. The duke tried to stop them and made a speech. He scolded them because they ran away at the moment of victory and asked them where they wanted to go. And he said: "Est mare post tergum; maris est iter ad remeandum Pergrauae, quod uobis tempus et aura negat." Which means "Behind you lies the sea. To return by sea is hard when both the wind and the weather are against you". This section shows us that the battle was possibly fought near the sea because the soldiers and William could see it as well. This information is confirmed later in the text when Harold's body was found. *The Carmen* says that the body was brought back to "repetens sua castra marina" or seaside camp. We know that the camp was made on the battlefield because other sources said that William buried his own dead soldiers there, and he marched to Romney from the battlefield. *The Carmen* claims that Harold's body was buried on a cliff, and after that William went back to Hastings. Therefore, Harold was possibly laid near the battlefield which was near to the sea.³⁸

The sea was mentioned in the Deeds of William as well. The author placed William's speech at his fortified camp not on the battlefield. There he said that the Normans were trapped, on one side by the army of the enemy and on the other side by the sea and armed forces (the fleet of the enemy). We do not know exactly where he has spoken but I think William could make the two speeches; one in his camp and one on the battlefield in order to make his army to counterattack.³⁹ However, he confirmed the information of *The Carmen* when he says that Harold's body was placed on a cliff near the sea, next to the battlefield. Harold was buried there because the Normans jested that he always guarded the seashore with his armies. Guy of Amiens used the word tumulus which means tomb on the seashore. In this chronicle, after the burials

³⁶ HERN 2017: 78.

³⁷ AMIENS 1998: 9, 11.

³⁸ AMIENS 1998: 27–29, 34–35.

³⁹ POITIERS 1998: 126–127.

of his own men, William went to Dover and didn't go back to Hastings, which means Harold wasn't buried in Hastings but on the battlefield.⁴⁰

There is another source which was written to Adela, the daughter of William by Baudri of Bourgueil. It is possible that the author knew the tapestry of Bayeux, and he described it in his poem. This poem was circulated between his friends so it was not widely known.⁴¹ His storytelling follows the other sources which were mentioned earlier; therefore, it can be reliable. It is interesting that this source claims that the battle was fought on the beach. It said when the Normans saw how huge the force of the enemy was they feared them. The poem mostly followed the storyline of *The Carmen*. The Anglo-Saxons formed a wedge-shaped 'phalanx', and William first tried to soften them up with arrows. Some of the enemy's soldiers tried to eliminate the archers, and the Normans used the first feigned retreat in order to attack the pursuers. After this the Anglo-Saxons made a counterattack and then the Normans were fleeing. At that time came the speech of William. However, I would like to highlight one thing. William said in the poem that the Normans couldn't escape because their fleet was far out at the sea, and there wasn't any castle to flee, thus they had no chance.⁴² This information can't be found in any other sources. William said in Deeds of William, at Hastings, that they can't escape from there because of the hostile weather of the sea.⁴³ It is probable in here that Bauldri followed the *Carmen* as well because in that poem William said the exact same thing. Therefore, in my opinion, this poem also confirmed that the battle was fought near the beach and the sea. William and his troops could not flee because the sea was near to them, and they couldn't go back to Hastings for the same reason as well.

Terrain and Malfosse

Now we know that the battle was fought beside the sea. Therefore, we should move to another characteristic as well and examine the terrain. Most of the chronicles said that the terrain was hilly with huge forests. *The Carmen*, which is one of the oldest sources, says that Harold tried to make a surprise attack against William. The duke marched against him, maintaining his battle order, thus he could avoid the assault of the Anglo-Saxon army. When the Anglo-Saxons saw that they could not make an attack from the woods, they marched out from their hiding places. At the top of the hill, there was a clearing, which was covered by the forest on two sides. Therefore, the Anglo-Saxons made their battle order and prepared for the fight. *The Carmen* also mentions that beside the hill there was a valley, and the land was too rough to be tilled. It is strange that *The Carmen* did not know about a trench or fosse in the area. It did not speak about the unfortunate Norman pursuit, when the Norman horses

⁴⁰ POITIERS 1998: 140–141.

⁴¹ OTTER 2001: 60–62.

⁴² OTTER 2001: 76–77.

⁴³ POITIERS 1998: 126–127.

fell because of the Malfosse.⁴⁴ It mentioned the rough terrain but did not keep the value of the terrain important for the outcome.

The Deeds of William also mentions that Harold tried to surprise William but he failed. William marched against him and the Anglo-Saxons thought him much more formidable than the Norwegians under Harald Hardrada. Therefore, they tried to gain the high ground so the Anglo-Saxon battle order was made at the top of the hill which was near the woods where they came from. The chronicle, such as *The Carmen*, also emphasised the rough terrain but the duke and his army got through and climbed the hill of the enemy. When the battle was over, the Anglo-Saxons tried to flee, some of them on the roads which crossed the battlefield, some on horseback and some on untrodden wastes. This record shows us that there were some roads and different passages on the battlefield; thus it was known for the Anglo-Saxons. Some of the soldiers could continue the battle thanks to a broken rampart and some labyrinth of ditches. This is the first source which mentions the Malfosse, and beside this some other ditches. We will see later at Wace that he thought that these ditches were made by the Anglo-Saxons, and they defended themselves there. William of Poitiers did not mention this, therefore, it couldn't be made by Harold's troops.⁴⁵

William of Jumiéges didn't mention much about the battlefield. He followed the basic description of the events, which started when Harold realised that William came to England. Then William of Jumiéges speaks generally about the process of the battle, and he mentions that the huge grass hides an ancient rampart (*antiquum aggerem tegebant*). This means that the ditch was man-made and much older, so it wasn't created by the soldiers of Harold. This means that the Malfosse could be Roman or maybe Briton. This fact can be strengthened by the huge grass which concealed the rampart.⁴⁶ This source also called the battlefield *Bellum*, or Battle.⁴⁷

The Chronicle of Battle Abbey followed the storyline of William Jumiéges. In the chronicle, after William left Hastings, he made another camp in Hechelend (nowadays Hedgeland), where he made the vow of building an abbey at the exact place of the battle. This place was occupied by the Anglo-Saxons who made a dense formation around their king. This source mentions only one feigned retreat; after that Harold was slain and the battle was won. The Normans chased the fleeing enemy but did not notice the hidden ditch. The chronicle cannot decide that this ditch was natural or man-made. The Normans could not see this because of the vegetation, and many had fallen from their horses.⁴⁸

The Orderic Vitalis also reports about the events, and it followed the storytelling of William of Poitiers. He did not speak about any hills on the battlefield which was called Senlac. We don't know exactly what it means, but I will speak about it later. However, it says that Harold was slain in the first hour of the battle, not in the end, so it has similarities with the chronicles of Wace and William of Jumiéges as well.⁴⁹

⁴⁴ AMIENS 1998: 23.

⁴⁵ POITIERS 1998: 126–127, 139.

⁴⁶ HOUTS 2003: 168, 169.

⁴⁷ HOUTS 2003: 173.

⁴⁸ SEARLE 1980: 39.

⁴⁹ VITALIS 1969: 176.

Orderic Vitalis also mentioned an ancient rampart as well, which means that the ditch was much older than the battle itself. I would like to show you two more sources. The first one, *Roman De Rou*, was written by Wace, an educated Norman poet in the twelfth century. This source also followed the storyline of our previous sources. He also states that Harold's line was made at the exact scene where Battle Abbey was later erected. There are many differences, however, between Wace and the other chronicles. The first one is that Harold and his brother, Girth, in *Roman De Rou* Gurth, had huge quarrels about the battle. At first Harold wanted to attack William at all costs, and Girth tried to persuade him to remain in London. Little before and under the battle, Harold was terrified by the huge numbers of the Normans and tried to back down. But Girth said to him continuously that he had to fight the battle. Moreover, William made a speech on a hill, near to the other one, which was occupied by the Anglo-Saxons.⁵⁰ Wace says that there was a Norman camp there, which can be possible as well because we know from *The Carmen* that William had a camp at the battlefield where Harold's body was transported.

It also states that the Anglo-Saxons created a fence before them which was made of ash wood and mud. Moreover, Wace knows about the ditch as well, which, the author says, was behind the Norman host. Therefore when the Anglo-Saxons made the counterattack, they drove the Normans toward it, and many fell from their horses in the process.⁵¹ He used this geographic object differently which is mentioned otherwise in other sources where the Normans chased the fleeing soldiers who tried to defend themselves at the ditch.⁵² I do not know where Wace took this information but it cannot be correct.

I would like to share another little information before I close this part. Florence of Worcester mentions that the battle was fought between William and Harold "at a place nine miles from Hastings".⁵³ In this part, possibly the Roman mile system was used, thus one mile can be changed to 1.49 km roughly. I tried to change the 9 miles into km and I received 13.41 km. Battle Abbey lies approximately 9 km from the castle of Hastings. Depending on this information, it could not be the place where the battle was fought.

Before I show you my theory of the location of the battlefield, I would like to summarise the different factors of the geography:

- It was fought on a beach or next to the sea.
- The area where the battle was fought is called Senlac.
- The area was full of woods, and there was a huge steep hill there, where the Anglo-Saxons made their battle line.
- There was a huge, ancient ditch which caused significant losses to the Normans.
- It was fought nine miles from Hastings.

⁵⁰ WACE 1837: 131–146.

⁵¹ WACE 1837: 178.

⁵² For example SEARLE 1980: 39; POITIERS 1998: 139; VITALIS 1969: 176.

⁵³ WORCESTER 1854: 170.

- The Anglo-Saxons were assembled near a *haran appledram*, which was a boundary signal. You can find information about the boundary signals in many English charters.⁵⁴
- The place was possibly called Battle, and an abbey was erected on the site. Because this is an important tradition, I kept this information as well.

My theory of the location of the battle

After I have studied the different sources, I would like to show you the place where the battle was fought. It is possible that the battle was near the abbey, but there is not any object that can testify this claim. The archeologists found only one axe in a road construction at Battle, but not much item was excavated from the area. Moreover, the sea was not close to the traditional site of the battle, and the researchers could not find the *Malfosse* either. If it had been there, it was demolished when the abbey was built. And also, the abbey lies 9 km (5 miles) from Hastings; therefore, it couldn't be the place that was mentioned by Florence of Worcester. Thus, I had to find another location which is perfect for the description of the different authors and chronicles. I started to look at the different place names in East-Sussex, and tried to match the different terrain with the descriptions of my sources. My first candidate was Appledore. The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle mentions that Harold tried to surprise William who came unawares about the enemy at Appledore.⁵⁵ The town was on the beach of the sea. It was a trade port and at that time (1066) the River Rother and the English Channel made a huge bay. Therefore, I thought that the battle was fought there, because the name matched with the one in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, and many sources mentioned that the sea was close to the battlefield.⁵⁶ Moreover, after the battle, William moved to Romney where he massacred an Anglo-Saxon band who slaughtered a Norman contingent when they had arrived at the wrong beach. Then he followed the main Roman road (Stane Street) in the eastern part of the English coast, and meanwhile he was occupying many fortified settlements (Dover, Canterbury).⁵⁷ It seemed to me that William continued his march in this direction because the battle was fought here and it was easier for him to continue his campaign on the eastern shore. However, Appledore is too far away from Hastings (25 km) and William had to make many crossings in the midst of marching, therefore, he couldn't reach the settlement with a three-hour journey. Moreover, the phrase *haran apuldran* means hoary apple tree, and the apple trees were used as boundary signs in medieval England; so it couldn't be the place where the battle was fought. Because I couldn't find this place suitable for the battle, I have searched for another place and I have found Brede, which received its name from the river Brede and had huge and beautiful meadows. It also fits the name *Senlac*, which could mean the same thing.

⁵⁴ For example A. D. 1026. King Cnut to Lyfing, bishop (of Crediton).

⁵⁵ Anglo-Saxon Chronicle 2023: 464.

⁵⁶ AMIENS 1998: 27–29; POITIERS 1998: 126–127.

⁵⁷ POITIERS 1998: 143–147.

It has a huge hillside and the sea stretched out in front of it in the Middle Ages. It also had iron ponds and it was the centre of ironworking in the Roman times. This means that it fits the other meaning of Senlac, Isen-Lacu, iron ponds. However, if Harold had occupied this position, he could easily have defeated William, because he would have had to cross the sea to reach the king and climb the hills. There William could be attacked in the midst of his crossing, which would mean a huge disadvantage for him. Moreover, I could not find an ancient rampart in the area, but natural ditches are common features of the landscape and they are mostly unseen because of the rich vegetation. However, our sources claim that this ditch was a man-made and ancient one, so it means that Brede is not perfect either.⁵⁸

After much research, I have found the perfect location. For the searching I used the Malfosse, because I thought that it was a significant object and not many places in East Sussex have a huge ditch. I also considered the different factors as well, which were explained in the previous pages. With this method, I have finally selected a location of the battle, which was fought presumably in Penhurst, East Sussex, England. As I said, the most decisive factor was the existence of a man-made ditch in the area. At Penhurst, there is a huge ancient ditch, which was possibly made by the Britons. I chose this place, because at first, I have found the Tent Hill. There is a local tradition that it was the exact place where William the Conqueror created his camp. The place stands south from Penhurst. Moreover, from the south of Tent Hill lies Standard Hill, which could be the place where William unravelled his banner.⁵⁹ We don't know what truth lies in this tradition, but between Penhurst and Battle, next to the Battle Road, there is a ditch which could be a city at the time of the Saxon Conquest. Local tradition says that there was a settlement in the area which was called Mercredsbourne. This was sieged by Aella, king of the South Saxons.⁶⁰ The ditch which was possibly part of the town lies in the Creep Wood, which is east of Penhurst. The name Creep Wood can possibly mean Crepa's Wood, which derives from a person's name, or possibly it means the Forest of the Dead. We don't know if it receives its name from the dead men after the siege or the dead men from the Battle of Hastings. Penhurst came from Pen+Hurst. The first part means head or ridge and the last part forest. At Penhurst there was a huge forest which now remains at Ashburham. Creep Wood, which is part of the ancient forest area called Weald, covers quite a few lower ridges in the area, not just the hill I mentioned earlier. The part of this forest, locally known as Townscreep, where the ditch is found, occupies the hilltop of an elevated spur, which is running from north to south. The top of the hill is flat for a half-mile distance, and it descends with considerable steepness. Moreover, the southern side of the hill has a thick grove, and the top of the hill is covered with underwood.⁶¹ If you had an army, you could only approach the top from the southern side because on the eastern and western sides there are two deep valleys. Therefore, you can only attack from the front.

⁵⁸ BANNISTER 2014: 5.9.

⁵⁹ Sussex World 2014.

⁶⁰ NAPPER 1894: 168–169.

⁶¹ TATHAM 1890: 140.

The ditch, which was mentioned above, is halfway from the top of the mountain, and it is an old earthwork.⁶² It was probably part of an ancient settlement, possibly Mercredbourne. The site is optimal for defence because the people who lived there had to defend themselves from the southern side. And because the woods and the steep valleys covered every direction, the enemy had to attack from the front. If we read the different descriptions about the battle, the location will become much more perfect for the battle. Wace mentioned that the Anglo-Saxons occupied the hilltop, and when the Normans retreated, they attacked them. The Normans didn't notice the large ditch when they tried to escape, and many soldiers fell from their horses and died.⁶³ Moreover, many sources mentioned that the ditch couldn't be seen by the huge grass⁶⁴ or the arbours.⁶⁵ The Norman knights fell from their horses when they were chasing the enemy and died instantly. These types of information strengthen our view that the battle was actually fought here.

Moreover, in ancient times, the sea streamed in the area. We know that the river Ashbourne is flowing in the valley and falls into the sea at Pevensey. I would like to show you the sea level at Penhurst in a different map in the year of 1066.

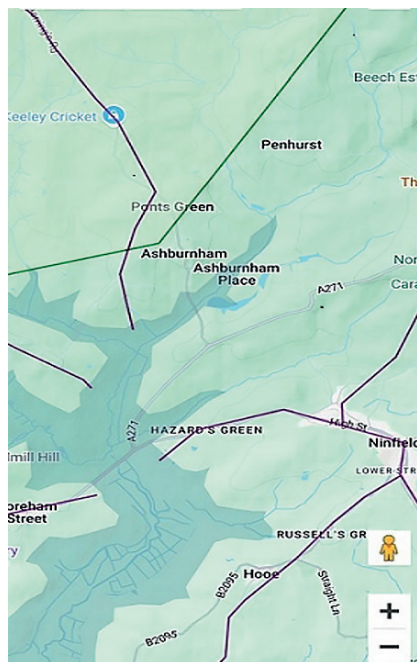


Figure 4: The sealine in 1066 at Penhurst

Source: https://saxonhistory.co.uk/Battle_of_Hastings_1066AD_Landscape.php

⁶² NAPPER 1894: 171–173.

⁶³ WACE 1837: 146–148.

⁶⁴ POITIERS 1998: 126–127.

⁶⁵ SEARLE 1980: 39.

As we know, and as you can see on Figure 4, the level of the sea was much higher in 1066 than in our time. The sea flooded Ashburnham Place and it stretched southward and covered much of Pevensey Bay and the Norman's Bay as well. Therefore, the sea created a peninsula at Hastings and the surrounding area. We know that after the siege of Mercredsbourne, Aella made a siege at Pevensey, and the survivors of the siege of Mercredsbourne possibly escaped there. This could be done by the sea which was near to the settlement, and the defenders could escape easier.⁶⁶ If William and his troops fought at Penhurst, which is highly probable, then they could see the sea from their back, and William could mention this in his speech. Moreover, as I have mentioned earlier, the Norman's camp was on the seaside in *The Carmen*.⁶⁷ This means that if the camp was created on the Tent Hill, as the local tradition suggests,⁶⁸ then it stood next to the sea. Many of our sources also mention that Harold was buried on the battlefield as well, and William and his soldiers jested about him and his army which guarded the sea.⁶⁹ If we look Figure 4 closely, we can see that Town Creep and Harold's possible position were also close to the beach as well. This is why the Normans made a joke about Harold and his army guarding the sea, because they stood at the top of a hill at the seaside.

As I have mentioned before, the area of the presumed battlefield is significantly wooded. At the top of the hill, there is a huge clearing and it was surrounded by woods. Therefore, the terrain is fit for the other descriptions of the battle. We know that Harold and his army stood at the top of a hill. *The Carmen* also mentions that the Anglo-Saxons came out from the woods from where they wanted to ambush William and formed their shield wall.⁷⁰ It could be done at the top of the hill where Town Creep lies. A couple of our sources mention that the terrain was uncultivated and rugged.⁷¹ At Penhurst the terrain is rugged and you can find natural ditches and dikes. Therefore, Penhurst matched with the terrain that was mentioned in other sources as well.

We also know that the area where the battle was fought is called Senlac in *Orderic Vitalis*.⁷² Nowadays, the hill where the tradition presumed the battle was fought bears this name. However, when you read about the different descriptions, they don't speak about a hill. The hill, where now the Abbey stands, received this name because there was a pool or lake nearby, and after it, the hill was named Senlac. Moreover, Senlac Hill received its name from sanguelac, or blood lake, because there was such a huge slaughter there and the blood made a huge lake.⁷³ However, there is another possibility. If the name means Isen-Lacu, or Iron Ponds, it can be applied to Penthurst. In Ashburham there were iron ponds because it was a centre of ironworking in the Roman Times and the Middle Ages as well.⁷⁴ Therefore, if the *Orderic Vitalis* mentioned

⁶⁶ NAPPER 1894: 9–12.

⁶⁷ AMIENS 1998: 27–29, 34–35.

⁶⁸ Sussex World 2014.

⁶⁹ POITIERS 1998: 126–127; HOUTS 2003.

⁷⁰ AMIENS 1998: 23.

⁷¹ POITIERS 1998: 128–129.

⁷² VITALIS 1969: 172, 173.

⁷³ FREEMAN 1869. 743–751.

⁷⁴ DELANY 1921: 26–28.

Senlac, he could mean iron ponds. If we think about *scean-leagh*, a beautiful meadow, it could be correct as well because the landscape is beautiful in the region.⁷⁵

Moreover, now we can pay attention to the distance between the battlefield and Hastings. I have changed it (from miles to km) and then put it up on Google Maps. On it I could see that my location is 13.48 km (approx. 9 miles) from Hastings, so this is mostly in line with the data of Florence Worcester's work. Therefore, this piece of information can assure that my location is good.

We have spoken about the *haran apuldran* question lately. It was a border sign where Harold might gathered his troops and waited for William. We don't know that if there was any apple tree at Penhurst where Harold could gather all of his men. I haven't found any evidence about it.

The reconstruction of the battle

Finally, after I have verified my location, I try to make a battle reconstruction as well. It is needed because I have worked with many sources and my audience should have a clear picture of the battle. I am not just trying to use my sources of the Battle of Hastings but I have found another battle which was fought by the Normans and it fits perfectly into the narrative of the Battle of Hastings. This was the Battle of Dyrrhachium in 1081 A.D., and it was fought between the Byzantine emperor, Alexios (I) Komnenos (r. 1081–1118), and Robert Guiscard. He attacked the Byzantine Empire because the son of a Byzantine pretender proposed to his daughter and asked help against Alexios. Thus, Robert made a huge fleet and from Sicily attacked Dyrrachium which was situated on a little peninsula in modern-day Albania.⁷⁶ So just like William, he made a disembarkation in a different country, and as the *Alexiad* said, he tried to gain the emperorship of the empire. Therefore, he needed a victory over the emperor as quickly as possible.⁷⁷ However, the two campaigns were waged differently because Robert didn't want to sack the local cities like William did in order to get results. William, on the other hand, attacked different settlements because he wanted to lure Harold into a battle. He wanted to achieve a quick victory because if the Anglo-Saxons had managed to encircle him, he would have been famished.⁷⁸ However, in both cases, their strategies worked. In the case of Robert, Alexios arrived with a huge force at Dyrrachium; he had the Varangian Guard (with Viking and Anglo-Saxon troops) and Turkish horse archers with him.⁷⁹ This contingent was lent by the Seljuk Sultan Suleyman I. In William's case, Harold arrived with a huge force at Penhurst, where he assembled his army. Moreover, both of the rulers tried to surprise their enemies, but the Norman dukes heard about the imminent attack, and they could prepare their armies for the battles. Both Harold and Alexios assembled their armies on a hill, near

⁷⁵ ALLRED 2022: 200.

⁷⁶ *Anna Comnena's Alexiad* 1928: 68–70.

⁷⁷ *Anna Comnena's Alexiad* 1928: 70.

⁷⁸ MORRIS 2013: 198.

⁷⁹ *Anna Comnena's Alexiad* 1928: 71.

the attacked city, next to the sea.⁸⁰ Moreover, just as William, Robert also couldn't go home because the Venetians destroyed his fleet and blocked his way.⁸¹ Also, the Byzantines joined the Venetians and made a joint blockade, just as Harold planned to do with William.

All of the participants created three divisions in their army. In Alexios' battle order, the Varangians had archers with them and moved forward to attack the Normans. The archers loosed their arrows and moved behind the line of the Varangians when an attack was imminent. Robert wanted to make a feigned retreat in order to let the Byzantines attack him. However, his contingent of knights was forced back. His cavalry on the right flank attacked the left side of the Varangians but a coordinated counterattack from them made the Normans fleeing. Therefore, the right flank of Robert was panicked and tried to leave the battlefield on sea.⁸² The initial moves of the Battle of Dyrrachium were very similar to the Battle of Hastings. William tried to dissolve the battle order of the Anglo-Saxons, so he first used his archers, then his infantry and after that his cavalry. But he could not achieve any success because the Anglo-Saxons managed to expel William's archers because they threw axes and different javelins. The Norman infantry could not break through, and neither could the cavalry.⁸³ In that moment came the feigned retreat. We don't know how it happened because we have different interpretations.

William of Poitiers says that in William's left side a rumour was spread that William was killed. So, his left flank fled. However, William showed himself to his soldiers and enticed them to continue the fight. After this, the Normans made two more feigned retreats.⁸⁴ The *Carmen* tells the story differently. It knows only two retreats; the first one was feigned and failed and then the Anglo-Saxons counterattacked. After that William's soldiers started to run.⁸⁵ Wace tells a different story, he said that the Anglo-Saxons made a counterattack against the Norman archers who started to flee. William sent in his cavalry in order to save them but the cavalry could not manage to stop the enemy's attack and fled.⁸⁶ However, all of our sources agree that this move helped to open the Anglo-Saxon 'phalanx', and William's troops managed to eliminate the different small contingents of the enemy. But which story is true? The narrative of Anna Comnena possibly helps us to find an answer to this question. She knows only two retreats on the right side; the first one was a feigned one and after the failure of another attack, the whole right flank was routed. The right side tried to flee towards the beach but Robert's wife managed to stop them.⁸⁷ This story is very much the same as what *The Carmen* and Wace tell us. *The Carmen* knows only two retreats⁸⁸ on the Norman side, and Wace implies that the panic spread in the Norman

⁸⁰ AMIENS 1998: 23; *Anna Comnena's Alexiad* 1928: 74.

⁸¹ *Anna Comnena's Alexiad* 1928: 72–73.

⁸² *Anna Comnena's Alexiad* 1928: 77–78.

⁸³ POITIERS 1998: 128–129.

⁸⁴ POITIERS 1998: 129–131.

⁸⁵ AMIENS 1998: 26–29.

⁸⁶ WACE 1837: 177–178.

⁸⁷ *Anna Comnena's Alexiad* 1928: 77

⁸⁸ AMIENS 1998: 26.

line after the counterattack of the enemy.⁸⁹ So the events of the Battle of Dyrrachium are very similar to the events of *The Carmen* and Wace. Therefore, I think that there were two retreats at Penhurst. The events of the story of William of Poitiers can be wrong because you can't surprise the enemy three times with this tactic. Moreover, after the main retreat of the Normans, William of Poitiers mentions that the Norman counterattack could cut paths into the Anglo-Saxon formation.⁹⁰ Therefore, why did they need to make two other feigned retreats? It doesn't make any sense. It is possible that the Anglo-Saxons started to make a counterattack because of two things. The first is that the sea was near to the battlefield and they tried to push the Normans into it.

And of course, it is possible that the Anglo-Saxons knew about the Malfosse, or Evil Ditch, and they also tried to push the Normans into it. Thus, they wanted to cause panic in the lines of the Normans and make them flee from the battlefield. However, with William's intervention, the Normans could make a counterattack and repel the Anglo-Saxons and eliminate their contingents. In both cases, after the panic was averted, the Normans made a huge counterattack against their enemies' infantry and made them flee.⁹¹ As we could see, after the different contingents of the armies of the enemy were repelled, both William and Robert made an attack with their cavalry against the centre where the leaders of their enemies were. William with his cavalry managed to cut holes into the Anglo-Saxon formation and possibly sent a death squad against Harold who was killed in the battle.⁹² Robert also managed to defeat the Byzantine centre, and his knights caught and wounded the emperor, who managed to escape from the battlefield.⁹³ As you can see, in both battles the Normans first suffered from serious setbacks, but with determination they managed to break their enemies. They used the feigned retreat, but this tool was useless against the infantry, which was able to make the cavalry flee. They could do that because they had a very dense formation with huge and massive weapons which were used efficiently in melee against the cavalry. Moreover, in both battlefields, there were certain geographical objects which helped the infantry with their counterattack. Both of the Norman commanders won because of their leadership skills and their professional armies, which could fight for hours with endurance and won the battle after all.

Conclusions

In this essay I have tried to determine the exact location of the Battle of Hastings. I have used many different sources, although at the exposition of the different geographical objects, I have relied mostly on the contemporary chronicles. First, I have examined and declined the different suggestions of the battlefield. These had many aspects I have found unreliable, and therefore they were rejected. The most acceptable location was the site of the Battle Abbey. My opinion is that the battlefield may lie at

⁸⁹ WACE 1837: 177.

⁹⁰ POITIERS 1998: 131.

⁹¹ POITIERS 1998: 126–127.

⁹² AMIENS 1998: 33.

⁹³ *Anna Comnena's Alexiad* 1928: 77.

Battle, but no artefacts have been found that relate to the events of 1066. For this reason, I rejected the possibility that the battle was fought there. After this, I have examined the contemporary sources in order to find information about the terrain and the events of the battle, and with their help, I was trying to identify the location. From the different types of information, I have made these conclusions: the battle was fought near the sea, 9 miles from Hastings on a rough and hilly plain. It had a Malfosse or Evil Ditch and a grey apple tree as a boundary sign. I haven't found any proof that this apple tree was on my suggested site, but the other assertions helped me find the perfect spot. My suggestion for the battlefield is Penhurst, East Sussex, where all of these geographic objects can be found.

Moreover, the events of the battle also strengthen our suggestion. The hillside was narrow with escarpments on both sides, so William's troops could not encircle the Anglo-Saxon troops and they needed to attack front-wise. The Malfosse in Penhurst is in the middle of the hillside; therefore, the counterattack of the Anglo-Saxons made the Normans fall from their horses when they tried to flee. *The Carmen* and the chronicle of Wace confirmed this event. Moreover, the Normans couldn't flee from the battlefield because they fought near the sea, and the sea helped William in persuading his soldiers to continue the fighting. At the battle of Dyrrachium, the Norman leadership did the same, and the Normans also continued their fighting. And finally, I have tried to reconstruct the events of the Battle of Hastings with the help of Anna Comnena's account about the Battle of Dyrrachium. I have found that the events of this battle are significantly matched with how the Battle of Hastings was fought. In both cases, the Norman army tried to climb a hillside and fought valiantly with the infantry of their enemies. These units managed to make the Normans flee, but their counterattacks failed, and they were massacred by the attacking Normans. At the final part, the Norman cavalry could attack the center of the enemy formation at Dyrrachium and Hastings and tried to kill their leader. At Hastings they managed to kill Harold, but Alexios survived his wounds and fled from the battlefield. He joined with his troops later.

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