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‘On the very spot’: In Defence of Battle

Roy Porter

The battle of Hastings is the most famous battle in English history. Two recently published books have claimed that the traditional location of the battle, commemorated by Battle Abbey, is wrong and that the battle occurred elsewhere. This article reviews the historical sources for the battle’s location and concludes that there is compelling evidence that Battle Abbey was indeed founded on the battlefield.

Fig. 1. The seal of Battle Abbey, depicting the west front of the abbey church founded by William I.

The battle of Hastings, one of the most decisive and close-run battles in military history, enjoys a pre-eminence in the English national story due to the massive social changes which followed it. Relatively richly endowed with primary source material, historians of the battle have used inconsistencies in these accounts to found debates about the size and skills of the armies involved, the tactics of William of Normandy and Harold Godwinson, and the narrative shape of the battle. Occasionally they have explicitly celebrated or bemoaned the battle’s result, and at times the historiographical contest has been fought with a passion commensurate to the savagery of the battle itself. Allen Brown’s observation that the only non-controversial fact about the Norman Conquest was that the Normans won is often repeated.¹

But until recently there was one other feature of the battle of Hastings which seemed to be universally agreed: at least the location of the battle fought on 14 October 1066 could be confidently identified, as it was marked by the abbey founded by William I and named after his most significant military victory (Fig. 1). Battle Abbey was regarded as being at least the very probable location of the battle. However, two recent books have received much media attention because they question this orthodoxy, claiming to demonstrate that the actual battlefield is to be found well away from the abbey site.

In *Secrets of the Norman Invasion*, Nick Austin locates the battlefield about three miles south of Battle at the village of Crowhurst (Fig. 2).² In a densely argued thesis, Austin makes the case for Crowhurst on the basis that its topography better matches the terrain described in the primary sources of the battle; that the basis of the

traditional location at Battle was an invention of the abbey’s monks and first set down in the *Chronicle of Battle Abbey*; and that the *Chronicle* contains evidence explicitly referring to Crowhurst as the authentic battlefield site. More recently, John Grehan and Martin Mace have put forward a second alternative battlefield in *The Battle of Hastings 1066: The Uncomfortable Truth*.³ Developing a suggestion put forward first by Jim Bradbury, Grehan and Mace prefer a location one mile north of the abbey at Caldbec Hill.⁴ Like Austin, they also posit topographical evidence and emphasize the unreliability of the *Chronicle of Battle Abbey*, also claiming it as the earliest source to identify the abbey site as the location of the battle. In addition, they assert that the hoar apple tree, identified by the D version of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle as the point at which Harold’s army rendezvoused and fought William’s forces, was located on Caldbec Hill (Figs 2 and 3). Given that Caldbec is higher and seemingly more defensible than Battle ridge, they argue that it is unlikely that Harold would have chosen to leave the higher ground for a more vulnerable position before the battle.⁵ Both books also argue from negative evidence, using the absence of any battlefield archaeology at Battle to support their arguments and to undermine the traditional site.

This article seeks to make good omissions made in both books. Specifically, Austin, Grehan and Mace fail to identify or discuss the range of historical evidence which exists in support of the traditional location of the battlefield with the exception of *The Chronicle of Battle Abbey*, which they say is unreliable.⁶ Austin goes further and says that *The Chronicle* supports his alternative battlefield location at Crowhurst. In fact, as this

Fig. 2. A map showing the traditional site of the battle of Hastings and the two alternative locations proposed in recent books, Crowhurst and Caldbec Hill.



article will show, *The Chronicle* consistently presents Battle Abbey as being founded on the site of the battle. Further, although the reliability of *The Chronicle* has been discredited, this is with regard to its portrait of particular events and disputes over types of authority in the 12th century; it does not follow that this should undermine all that *The Chronicle* has to say of the foundation of Battle Abbey. In any case, as we shall see, *The Chronicle* stands as the summation of a tradition placing the abbey on the battlefield, a tradition which is attested by several documentary sources which allow us to trace it back to within living memory of 1066. This historical evidence, buttressed by the physical peculiarities of the abbey, is enough to make a compelling case for the traditional site.

THE CHRONICLE OF BATTLE ABBEY

'We of St. Martin's at Battle have readily available to us a good deal of information about the size and organization of our abbey, preserved for the

guidance of future generations in a narrative account.⁷ So begins *The Chronicle of Battle Abbey*, before providing an account of the foundation of the monastery by William I and its subsequent history. Written by an anonymous monk or monks of Battle in the closing third of the 12th century, the manuscript actually contains two chronicles, a short version which provides the most detail about the foundation of the abbey, and a second, longer, chronicle, which briefly rehearses the foundation story but commits most of its space to describing the legal battle entered into by the abbey in its attempt to maintain its independence from episcopal oversight during the reign of Henry II (Fig. 4).⁸ Whether the two chronicles were originally bound together is unknown, and the relationship between the two is not straightforward. It is not entirely clear, for example, which is the earlier document: although its most modern editor believed that the shorter preceded the longer, other scholars has questioned this.⁹ Nor is the

date of composition easy to determine, with palaeographical and internal evidence suggesting a possible date range of c.1170–c.1210.¹⁰ The purpose of *The Chronicle* is set out in a short preface, in which it is stated that earlier documents and oral tradition have been used to compose an account of the abbey's endowment and the customs and privileges enjoyed by the monastery, together with the causes of various lawsuits, 'for the warning or convenience of future generations'.¹¹

According to *The Chronicle*, the decision by William I to found an abbey on the site of his confrontation with Harold was made immediately before the battle itself. In this version of events, having drawn up his forces on a hill towards Hastings (identified by *The Chronicle* as *Hedglan*), William's hauberk is handed to him the wrong way round.¹² With people around him apparently identifying this as an ill omen, William makes a speech in which he says that he does not credit omens and soothsayers. He then rallies his soldiers by promising to found an abbey in what has become known to historians as William's 'battlefield oath':

*And to strengthen the hands and hearts of you who are about to fight for me, I make a vow on this very battlefield I shall found a monastery for the salvation of all, and especially for those who fall here, to the honour of God and his saints, where servants of God may be supported: a fitting monastery, with a worthy liberty. Let it be an atonement: a haven for all, as free as the one I conquer for myself.*¹³

One of those present is a monk of Marmoutier, called William 'the Smith', who, upon hearing the vow, suggests to Duke William that the abbey be founded in veneration of Bishop Martin, something to which Duke William readily assents.¹⁴ The battle then follows, with the English occupying the hill 'where the church now stands, in an impenetrable formation around their king'.¹⁵ Following the battle, the place where Harold's standard had flown is marked before William leaves the battlefield.¹⁶ The foundation of the abbey does not immediately follow due to difficulties William I faced in consolidating his victory: '... although he never actually forgot his vow, yet because of the preoccupations of this period, he put off its

fulfilment ... for a long time.'¹⁷ In time, however, pricked by his conscience and by the urging of William 'the Smith', the King makes good his vow by commanding the monk to bring some of his colleagues from Marmoutier to found a monastery on the battlefield.¹⁸ Dismayed by the topographical conditions presented by the battlefield ('on a hill, and so dry of soil, and quite without springs'), the monks decide to move to an alternative location until the King angrily orders them to move back to the battlefield, with the high altar of the abbey's church placed 'as the king had commanded, in the very place where Harold's emblem, which they call a "standard", was seen to have fallen'.¹⁹

Such then, in summary, is *The Chronicle's* account of Battle Abbey's foundation. The scholarly consensus is that the battlefield oath as described in *The Chronicle* is almost certainly an invention of the 12th century. It is not original to *The Chronicle*; its earliest appearance is in two writs purporting to be of William I and issued in 1070, but containing forms and expressions more suggestive of a 12th-century date.²⁰ In the writs there are brief references to the battlefield oath, which is there said to have followed William's victory rather than to have preceded it (the abbey founded by William as the result of a vow made on account of the victory granted to him there by God); it is not impossible that a reference to such a vow was contained in a genuine writ to which was later added interpolations, although a date after the middle of the 12th century is regarded as more probable.²¹ *The Chronicle's* version of events, on the other hand, elevates the status of the oath, placing it before the battle and making it instrumental in William's victory, for it claims that his words made his men more courageous in the ensuing battle.²²

It is in fact more likely that Battle Abbey's origins lie with the penances imposed on William I and those who fought with him at Hastings by the bishops of Normandy. These penances are listed in a document known as the penitential ordinance, which was probably written soon after William's return to Normandy in 1067, but formally confirmed by the papal legate in 1070, setting out requirements for penance relative to the amount of violence perpetrated by each individual.²³ Perhaps tellingly, the provision for those who could not remember how many people they had struck or killed in the battle was to do



Fig. 3. View looking northwards over Battle Abbey, with the town of Battle stretched out along its high street. The prominent white building in the cloud shadow towards the top of the photograph is a windmill located on Caldbeck Hill.

penance one day a week for the rest of their lives or to build a church or to give perpetual alms to one. The lapse in time between the penitential ordinance's probable composition and its confirmation by the legate may account for Battle Abbey's not being founded immediately after the battle.²⁴ In 1076 the abbey's church was in sufficient order for it to be the venue of Abbot Gausbert's blessing before the altar of St. Martin, so presumably its east end was completed by this date.²⁵

In founding an abbey as an act of penance, William was following precedents set by earlier victors such as Count Fulk Nerra of Anjou, who founded an abbey at Loches after his victory at the battle of Conquereuil in 992, and King Cnut, who founded a memorial church on the site of his victory over Edmond Ironside at the battle of *Assandun* in 1016.²⁶ Conversely, the foundation of two churches in the 1070s by a closer contemporary, Count Robert I of Flanders, following his conquest of Flanders, seems to have

been primarily commemorative rather than penitential.²⁷ Whether the apparently provocatively bellicose name of William's Battle Abbey was an indication of penitential remorse or commemoration is not entirely clear.²⁸ According to *The Chronicle*, the abbey's purpose was to be a place 'where servants of God might be brought together for the salvation of all' and especially for those who fell in the battle, 'a place of sanctuary and help for all, paying back for the blood shed there by an unending chain of good works'.²⁹ However, elsewhere *The Chronicle* states that the abbey's name of battle was determined by the King 'to preserve the memory of his victory'.³⁰ In truth William I's foundation could well have been both penitential and commemorative, and the abbey would have served as the physical manifestation of the divine support William enjoyed in the battle. What is certain is that William's foundation of an abbey after a victory in battle was not an unusual or novel act in the 11th century.

In the current debate regarding the location of the battle of Hastings two specific claims have been made about the evidence presented by *The Chronicle*. First, in *Secrets of the Norman Invasion*, Nick Austin argues that *The Chronicle* states that the battle took place at Crowhurst. This assertion is based on his reading of the section of *The Chronicle* dealing with how, when the first monks arrived from Marmoutier with William ‘the Smith’, they decided to build the abbey away from the battlefield in a more conducive spot. The original Latin text and Eleanor Searle’s translation read as follows:

*Qui memoratum belli locum considerantes cum ad tam insignem fabricam minus idoneum, ut uidebatur, arbitrentur in humiliori non procul loco, uersus eiusdem collis occidentalem plagam, aptum habitandi locum eligentes ibidem ne nil operis agree uiderentur mansiunculas quasdam fabricauerunt. Qui locus, hucusque Herste cognominatus, quondam habet spinam in huius rei monimentum.*³¹

*They studied the battlefield and decided that it seemed hardly suitable for so outstanding a building. They therefore chose a fit place for settling, a site located not far off, but somewhat lower down, towards the western slope of the ridge. There, lest they seem to be doing nothing, they built themselves some little huts. This place, still called Herste, has a low wall as a mark of this.*³²

For Austin, the use of *qui* at the start of both sentences implies that the original author intended their mutual subject to be the battlefield.³³ By this reasoning, the reference to Herste is to the battlefield and the general meaning of the passage would be that, having studied the battlefield and decided that it was not suitable for their abbey, the monks chose to build instead at a location not far off, and that the original site was called Herste and is marked by a wall. Austin also argues that *Herste* is the monastic scribe’s mistaken attempt at writing a phonetic version of ‘Cruurst’, which he claims was the local dialect form of Crowhurst.³⁴

There are numerous problems with Austin’s reading. First, the double use of *qui* does not imply that both sentences have as their subject the battlefield. Searle’s translation uses a standard

usage known as a connective relative to differentiate between the monks in the first sentence and the battlefield in the final sentence.³⁵ The subject of the first sentence is the group of monks from Marmoutier, who are listed in the immediately preceding sentence.³⁶ The subject of the final sentence refers to the place the monks chose instead of the battlefield. This was Searle’s understanding of the text, as in a footnote to this passage she notes that Herste is identified elsewhere in *The Chronicle* as being to the north-west of the abbey site and that this alternative location offered the monks a more suitable building site, being level ground by comparison with the hillside on which the battle was fought.³⁷ When considered on its own merits, Austin’s interpretation of this passage is eccentric, but when viewed in the context of *The Chronicle* as a whole it seems perverse. This is because the whole thrust of this part of the narrative is to underline that the abbey was built on the battlefield at the express order of William I. The very next section of *The Chronicle* records how William, when asked if he would accept the alternative location for the abbey, ‘refused angrily and ordered them to lay the foundations of the church speedily and on the very spot where his enemy had fallen and the victory been won’.³⁸ It is unreasonable to suggest that Herste was being identified by *The Chronicle*’s author as the real battlefield site when one of the author’s intentions was evidently to illustrate that the abbey was built on the site of the battle. The point is reinforced by references elsewhere in *The Chronicle* to the battlefield. For example, Harold is described as having ‘fearlessly, but rashly, hurried to the place which is now called Battle’ to fight William; the English army is said to have occupied the site where the abbey church was later constructed; and William is said to have ‘resolved that the abbey be called Battle, to preserve the memory of his victory, because there by the grace of God the Thunderer he had won a victory and a kingdom for himself and his heirs’.³⁹ A final *coup de grâce* to Austin’s theory is that Crowhurst is mentioned separately in *The Chronicle* — the author clearly regarded Herste and Crowhurst as distinct and separate places.⁴⁰

In *The Battle of Hastings 1066: The Uncomfortable Truth*, John Grehan and Martin Mace approach *The Chronicle*’s account in a different manner, declaring that it is ‘entirely

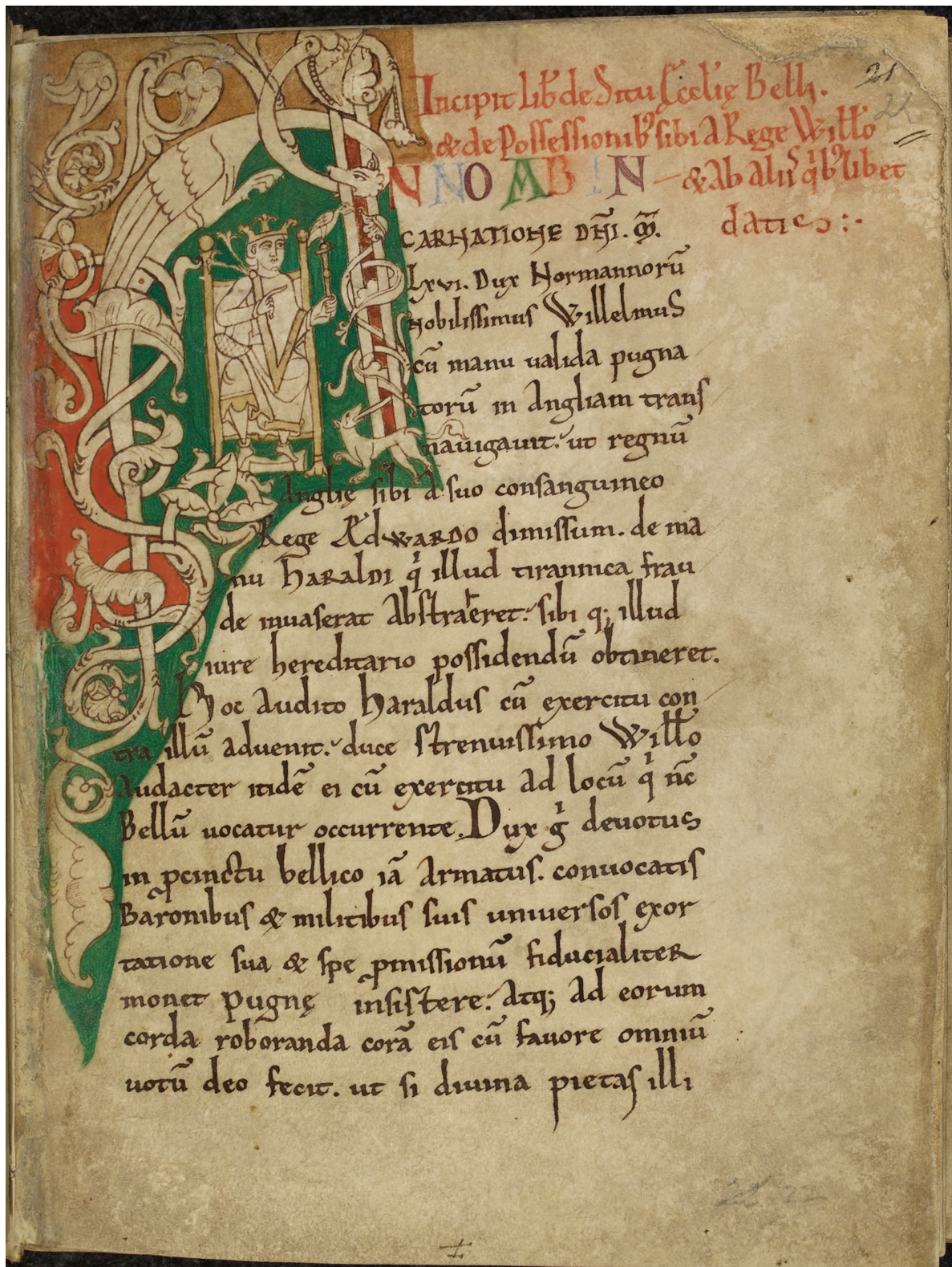


Fig. 4. The Chronicle of Battle Abbey: the opening page of the second chronicle, with William I enthroned within the initial A. British Library, Cotton MS Domitian II, fol. 22r.

fabricated' and that the amount of detail given to the tale that an alternative location for the abbey was preferred by the monks suggests that by the later 12th century, when *The Chronicle* was being written, the abbey's claim to marking the site of the battle was being contested and that the story was concocted to persuade a sceptical audience.⁴¹ Two rebuttals can be offered to this interpretation. First, there is absolutely no contemporary evidence to suggest that the battlefield location was in doubt. Second, as we shall see, *The Chronicle's* identification of abbey and battlefield on the same location is supported by earlier sources, so cannot be a complete fabrication by *The Chronicle's* author. As told by *The Chronicle*, it was the King's insistence that the abbey be built on the battlefield which resulted in its construction in an impractical location. Even if the exact course of events as described by *The Chronicle* are open to question, there must have been an imperative for building here, and marking the site of the battle remains the most probable reason.

The second claim made against *The Chronicle of Battle Abbey* is that it is a demonstrably unreliable document because of its association with a series of forged charters created in the latter half of the 12th century. Several such charters were produced by the monks of Battle at a time when they were claiming independence from episcopal oversight by the bishops of Chichester. Production of forged documents occurred during the abbacy of Walter de Luci (1139–71) and were intended to provide written evidence in support of the monks' claim that the abbey enjoyed special privileges bestowed on it by William I.⁴² The conflict reached a head in 1155, when de Luci was excommunicated by Bishop Hilary after refusing to attend synod and the legal debate was brought to the attention of Henry II at a royal council. The King agreed to confirm under his seal the charters produced by Walter de Luci, although they were contested by both the Bishop of Chichester and the Archbishop of Canterbury.⁴³ The degree to which *The Chronicle* can be trusted as an account of this dispute is itself the subject of scholarly debate. For Eleanor Searle, *The Chronicle's* author knew that the charters were false but probably believed that the claims in them represented the situation established by William I, and *The Chronicle's* account of the legal case is reliable. More

recently, Nicholas Vincent has argued that *The Chronicle* may be much less reliable, asking whether it may be 'a complex composition, intended to supply a circumstantial context for forgeries, not only of the eleventh-century but of all subsequent periods?'.⁴⁴

These uncertainties have been used in an attempt to undermine the traditional link between Battle Abbey and the battlefield by Austin, Grehan and Mace, all of whom argue that the claim that the abbey was founded on the site of the battle was created as part of the wider fabrication of claims by the monks in the mid-12th century.⁴⁵ In order to reach this conclusion, however, it is necessary to elide the specifics of the legal debate between Walter de Luci and Bishop Hilary of Chichester with the narrative of the abbey's foundation. At the heart of the legal dispute was the question of authority, with the Bishop of Chichester claiming the right to bless an abbot-elect and expect an oath of obedience from him, the right to summon the abbots of Battle to synods, and the entitlement of 'being entertained in the abbey and in its manors by episcopal right and by custom'.⁴⁶ In response, the monks turned to William I's battlefield oath and the claims of liberty for the abbey addressed in it. This certainly increases the suspicion that the battlefield oath, at least in the form it takes in *The Chronicle*, is a product of the mid-12th century, but it does not follow that the notion that the abbey was founded by William I on the site of the battle is undermined. As far as our sources tell us, the question of whether the abbey was actually founded on the site of the battle was never raised during the lengthy legal wrangles between the abbey and the bishops of Chichester. It did not need to be, as the alleged privileges bestowed by William I were not dependent on the details of the abbey's location but on how he intended to endow his foundation. In other words, provided that the abbey's foundation by William I was accepted (which it was), the battlefield's location was irrelevant to both parties in the dispute because the case centred on William's intentions for his foundation. There was no need to create from scratch a story that the abbey was established on the site of the battle, as is suggested by Austin, Grehan and Mace. It suits the purposes of these authors to question the credibility of *The Chronicle* in this regard because they claim — erroneously — that *The Chronicle* is

the earliest source identifying the abbey's location with the battlefield.⁴⁷ In fact, this identification is demonstrably far older than the *Chronicle* and it is to the earlier sources which we now turn.

THE *BREVIS RELATIO*

We have already seen that *The Chronicle of Battle Abbey's* preface refers to the existence of earlier accounts of the abbey. One of these documents was certainly the *Brevis Relatio de Guillelmo nobilissimo*, written by a monk of Battle in the second decade of the 12th century.⁴⁸ Despite its title, the *Brevis Relatio* is more than an account of the life of William of Normandy, providing a history of Normandy and England from c.1035 to the early 12th century. Its date can be established by internal evidence: a reference to the marriage of Henry I's daughter, Matilda, in 1114 means that it must post-date this event, while the expressed hope that Henry I's son William, who died in November 1120, 'will be a good man' demonstrates that this event had not yet occurred at the time of composition.⁴⁹ The *Brevis Relatio* was, then, written within 54 years of the Battle of Hastings and within the abbacy of Abbot Ralph (1107–24), who had come to England from Normandy in 1070, who had been a royal chaplain, and who knew William I personally.⁵⁰

The account of the battle provided by the *Brevis Relatio* was used by the author(s) of *The Chronicle of Battle Abbey*. Here we find the same sequence of pre-battle events, with William stopping at a hill opposite Harold's position and putting on his hauberk the wrong way round; again William makes a speech saying that he does not trust soothsayers but entrusts his life to God and, having established where Harold's standard is positioned, charges into battle after declaring that he trusts God will grant him victory.⁵¹ There is no reference to the battlefield oath in the *Brevis Relatio*, but the identification of the abbey's site and the battlefield is left in no doubt. We are told that Harold and his soldiers arrived 'at a place which is now called Battle' and that his standard was at the centre of the crowded retinue positioned at the summit of the hill; that the battle took place 'on the site where William, count of the Normans, afterwards king of the English, had an abbey built . . .', a point repeated later.⁵² An insight into William's motives for founding the abbey is suggested by the author's statement that Battle Abbey was built 'to the

memory of this victory and for the absolution of the sins of all who had been slain there'.⁵³

SOURCES FROM BEYOND BATTLE ABBEY

The *Brevis Relatio*, like *The Chronicle of Battle Abbey*, was a product of the abbey. The same cannot be said of the association between the abbey's location and the battlefield, as this is attested in several early sources written outside Battle. One of the latest of these is the *Roman de Rou*, written by Master Wace in the 1160s and 1170s. Originally from Jersey, Wace was a cleric who enjoyed the patronage of Henry II and wrote the *Roman de Rou* at the King's request. Wace wrote in vernacular Norman French verse, and the *Roman de Rou* is more than 16,000 lines long, providing a detailed and colourful account of the Norman invasion of England. Wace appears to have been a conscientious historian, seeking out oral and written accounts and laying bare tensions between his sources; but his account was coloured by events of his own times.⁵⁴ Wace tells us of Harold's approach to the battlefield that he 'led his men forward, as troops who were fully armed, to a place where he raised his standard; he had his pennon fixed at the very spot where Battle Abbey was built' ('*Tant a sa gent avant menee, comme gent qui alout armee, qu'il fist son estandart drecie et fist son gonfanon fichier iloc tot dreit on l'abeie de la Bataille est estable*').⁵⁵ Wace included a number of anecdotes from the *Brevis Relatio* in his *Roman de Rou*, so may have taken this reference to the dual location of the battlefield and abbey from the earlier work. Even if this was the case, given Wace's willingness to expose differences between irreconcilable sources it is interesting, if not significant, that he makes no reference whatsoever to any alternative location of the battle.

Moving further back in time, we come to four monastic historians of the first half of the 12th century who all maintained that the abbey was built on the site of the battle: John of Worcester, William of Malmesbury, Orderic Vitalis and Henry of Huntingdon. These authors used shared and separate sources, which accounts for the similarity of their statements. Their accounts of Battle Abbey's foundation are brief and to the point. Writing between 1124 and 1140, the English monk John of Worcester maintained a *Chronicon ex Chronicis* ('Chronicle of Chronicles') in which he noted '[the abbey of]

of St. Martin at Battle which King William the Elder founded and erected on the site of his battle in England. The church's altar was placed where the body of Harold (slain for the love of his country) was found.⁵⁶ Apart from noting John's sympathy for Harold, this short statement also identifies the abbey not just with the battlefield but with Harold's position at the centre of the conflict, and thus tallies with Wace's later assertion.

William of Malmesbury's *Gesta Regum Anglorum* ('Deeds of the Kings of the English'), written c.1125, echoes John's account, noting that the abbey was founded '... in honour of St. Martin, and it is called Battle Abbey because the principal church is to be seen on the very spot where, according to tradition, among the piled heaps of corpses Harold was found.'⁵⁷ William of Malmesbury was careful to note that the dual location of the abbey church and the place where Harold's body was discovered was based on tradition, but his account demonstrates that this tradition was current within 60 years of the battle.

Our two other Anglo-Norman monastic sources do not reflect this particular tradition but nevertheless maintain that the abbey was built on the battlefield. Orderic Vitalis, like William of Malmesbury an Anglo-Norman by birth but settled in Normandy, was writing at the turn of the 12th century. In one of his interpolations of William of Jumièges' *Gesta Normannorum Ducum*, written before 1113, Orderic writes, 'The site ... [where] the combat took place is ... called Battle to the present day. There King William founded a monastery dedicated to the Holy Trinity, filled it with monks of Marmoutier ... and endowed it with the necessary wealth to enable them to pray for the dead of both sides.'⁵⁸ Elsewhere, in his *Historia Ecclesiastica*, Orderic wrote that after William I 'had gone to war, triumphed over his enemies, and received a royal crown at London he built the abbey of the Holy Trinity at Senlac, the site of the battle, and endowed it with wealth and possessions'.⁵⁹

Finally, Henry of Huntingdon, writing before 1129, recorded in his *Historia Anglorum* that, 'In that place [*i.e.*, the battlefield] King William later built a noble abbey for the souls of the departed, and called it by the fitting name of Battle.'⁶⁰ Against the collective evidence of these four monastic historians there are no recorded contemporary dissenting voices regarding the

common location of the battlefield and abbey sites.

Amongst the sources used by at least three of 12th-century historians we have considered, John of Worcester, William of Malmesbury and Henry of Huntingdon, was the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle.⁶¹ The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle is not a single document but survives in several versions, the latest of which is that known to historians as E, which was continued in Peterborough until 1154. The Peterborough annalist copied entries for the years before 1121 from a manuscript originating at St Augustine's Abbey, Canterbury, but interpolated this source with material gained from elsewhere.⁶² In its annal for 1086 [*recte* 1087] the Peterborough manuscript contains an obituary of William I. The original of this section was written by one claiming the personal knowledge of a courtier, for it states, 'If anyone desires to know what kind of man he was ... then shall we write of him as we have known him, who have ourselves seen him and at one time dwelt in his court.'⁶³ Further, internal evidence suggests that this courtier wrote his account of William fairly soon after his death since in his description of the king's sons he notes that Robert became Duke of Normandy, William became king of England and Henry was 'bequeathed treasures innumerable'. The author shows no foreknowledge of the fact that Henry later became King of England, and it seems extremely likely, therefore, that this account was written before 1100, the year of Henry's accession. This is important because it dates the account to within 34 years of the battle of Hastings. The annalist recorded that William was good to men who loved God and observed that 'On the very spot where God granted him the conquest of England he caused a great abbey to be built; and settled monks in it and richly endowed it.'⁶⁴ This evidence, written by an Englishman in English and emphatic in its identification of the abbey site being on the battlefield of Hastings ('*On ðam ilcan steode*'),⁶⁵ is crucial on two counts: it is the earliest surviving reference to the dual location and it was written well within living memory of 1066, almost certainly before the end of the 11th century. Perhaps unsurprisingly, it is also completely ignored by the proponents of the recently advanced alternative locations of the battle.⁶⁶

AN UNSUITABLE SITE

The topography of Battle Abbey's location, situated on a narrow ridge, presented the abbey's builders with the challenge of laying out a monastery within a constricted area, with land falling away to east, west and (most noticeably) to the south, while to the north was the London–Hastings road. It was hardly ideal territory, only later mitigated through architectural design and substantial changes to the topography by levelling, terracing and re-profiling slopes.⁶⁷ The most eloquent testimony to the effort required is the surviving 13th-century dorter range of the abbey, which was built southwards from the heart of the claustral area over the slope of the ridge. In order to accommodate a continuously level first floor over its full length (about 50 metres), it was necessary to construct an undercroft of increasingly gargantuan proportions to counteract the fall of the ground (Fig. 5). Meanwhile, excavation has shown that while the abbey church's foundations were built off the natural summit of the hill, other buildings, such as the putative 13th-century infirmary south-east of the church, required artificially created platforms; while east of the chapter-house extensive terracing took place. In addition, excavation has revealed how the southern slope of the hillside has been reduced in severity over time, with an accumulation of 2.4 metres of material to the north of the reredorter.⁶⁸ When this is combined with the post-Suppression changes in level to the courtyard west of the claustral ranges, it can be seen that the topography of the site was changed considerably between the 11th and the 16th centuries in order to make what must have been an originally inconvenient site conveniently habitable. A further demonstration of the general unsuitability of the place for monastic purposes was the difficulty of channelling water across the monastic complex, which required the reredorter or latrine to be cleaned out by hand.⁶⁹ Cumulatively, these features justify the assertion in the Chronicle that the first monks regarded the site as 'hardly suitable for so outstanding a building'.⁷⁰

Indeed, the peculiar character of the site begs the question: why was the abbey built here if not to mark the battle? Grehan and Mace have suggested that the answer lies in the strategic location of the site. Drawing on an argument first

presented by Eleanor Searle in 1979, they suggest that Battle Abbey was founded to contribute to the defence of the Rape of Hastings through the establishment of its independent *leuga* and its position 'in the most suitable spot to block an enemy advance from the coast'.⁷¹ The *leuga* was all the land within one and a half miles of the abbey, over which the abbey enjoyed complete authority.⁷² Compelling us to 'remember that ecclesiastical buildings in medieval times were defensive structures', Grehan and Mace follow Searle in arguing that the combination of a new town in a poorly populated area and an abbey built in a strategic location would provide a buffer behind the more populous coastal plain, with the abbey a useful independent foil to the Count of Eu, who had been granted the Rape of Hastings by William I.⁷³ But why would William have chosen to found an abbey, which in the event took several years to be even partially completed, rather than his more usual practice of establishing a castle? An even greater problem for those who wish to use this argument to suggest that the abbey's location had nothing to do with the specific site of the battle of Hastings is that it does not explain the particular siting of the abbey. If there was no reason beyond the strategic importance of the area of the battle, why choose to build on such an awkward and constricted site? Why not found an abbey within the vicinity of the battlefield but at a more convenient site, where the ground was level, rather than on the top of a narrow ridge? The abbots of Battle Abbey were to play an important role in the defence of the southeast coastal districts against French raids during the 14th century.⁷⁴ But the specific location of the abbey on Battle ridge was not dependent on this role, a point recognized by Eleanor Searle herself, who wrote that 'there is no reason to doubt that it was founded on the battlefield'.⁷⁵

The changes in topography outlined above need to be taken into account when consideration is given to the relative characters of Battle and the alternative locations proposed for the battle of Hastings. It is clear that over 900 years of occupation of the ridge at Battle and use of the adjacent land to the south for agriculture, industry and as parkland have had a dramatic effect on the site of the battle, with the defensive qualities of the hillside eroded by these changes. The foundation of the abbey at the



Fig. 5. The southern undercroft of the dorter range at Battle Abbey. The soaring dimensions of the space are the result of the building having to overcome the difficulties of a hillside location.

presumed site of the climax of the conflict, and the associated campaigns of ground movement required for its construction, have almost certainly had a damaging effect on some of the potential for uncovering the sort of fragile and ephemeral battle-related archaeological deposits which might be expected to survive from the 11th century.⁷⁶ The lack of battlefield

archaeology encountered at Battle has been posited as negative evidence against the traditional location.⁷⁷ It should be borne in mind that modern archaeological investigation of Battle Abbey has been limited to the area around the dorter range, supplemented by the odd watching brief during the introduction of services and evaluations in advance of new buildings in the

monastic outer precinct.⁷⁸ Earlier investigations were largely wall-chasing medieval buildings. There has been no systematic investigation of the monastic precinct, let alone the wider battlefield site. Given this and the physically intrusive uses of the site since the 11th century, it is no surprise that archaeological evidence related to a single day in 1066 (no matter how historically significant the event which occurred on that day) has yet been encountered.⁷⁹

CONCLUSION

The sources considered above demonstrate that the association between the battlefield and Battle Abbey was not created by the monks of Battle in the late 12th century and first recorded in *The Chronicle of Battle Abbey*. Instead, *The Chronicle's* account of the abbey's foundation was the summation of a much earlier tradition, acknowledged by monastic historians of the early 12th century and recorded in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle within living memory of the battle. Historical evidence alone cannot prove that the battle of Hastings occurred at the hillside later marked by Battle Abbey but any discussion of the battle's location must take into account the range of early sources identifying Battle as the site of the battlefield. On the basis of this historical evidence and the peculiar physical characteristics of the location chosen for the abbey there are strong grounds for supposing that the tradition is correct. Hopefully, the evidence presented here will help to frame and inform any further debate.

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NOTES

- 1 R Allen Brown, 'The Battle of Hastings', in R Allen Brown (ed.), *Anglo-Norman Studies: Proceedings of the Battle Conference, III, 1980*, Woodbridge, 1981, 21.
- 2 Nick Austin, *Secrets of the Norman Invasion*, Crowhurst, 2010.
- 3 John Grehan and Martin Mace, *The Battle of Hastings 1066: The Uncomfortable Truth*, Barnsley, 2012.
- 4 As with Austin, Grehan and Mace, Bradbury erroneously locates the origins of the traditional association between Battle Abbey and

the battlefield in the Chronicle of Battle Abbey. Unlike them, he concluded that 'on the ground of probability, there remains a good case for the traditional site' (Jim Bradbury, *The Battle of Hastings*, Stroud, 1998, 173–78).

- 5 Grehan and Mace, *op. cit.*, 148–51, provides a summary of the authors' arguments.
- 6 This may be a deliberate decision rather than the result of ignorance of the sources. Grehan and Mace explain that, 'through the limitations of space and the desire not to repeat the same information too often, [we have] extracted that information which best suits our hypothesis' (Grehan and Mace, *op. cit.*, 6), while Nick Austin writes that he does not care what the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle says (Austin, *op. cit.*, 236).
- 7 Eleanor Searle (ed.), *The Chronicle of Battle Abbey*, Oxford, 1980, 33.
- 8 The manuscript is to be found in British Library, Cotton Domitian A ii. The standard modern translation is that provided by Eleanor Searle in the Oxford Medieval Texts series.
- 9 Nicholas Vincent, 'King Henry II and the monks of Battle: the Battle Chronicle unmasked', in Richard Gameson and Henrietta Leyser (eds), *Belief and Culture in the Middle Ages: Studies Presented to Henry Mayr-Harting*, Oxford, 2001, 266.
- 10 Vincent, *op. cit.*, 268; *Chronicle*, 8; Nicholas Vincent, 'The charters of King Henry II: the introduction of the royal *Inspeximus* revisited', in Michael Gervers (ed.), *Dating Undated Medieval Charters*, Woodbridge, 2002, 106. Michael Kauffman has suggested that the illuminated portrait of William I on the opening folio of the long chronicle is dateable to c.1130 (George Zarnecki, Janet Holt and Tristram Holland, *English Romanesque Art*, London, 1984, 91).
- 11 *Chronicle*, 33.
- 12 This is an example of the Chronicle of Battle Abbey preserving an earlier tradition. The earliest surviving description of this particular event is by William of Poitiers, writing in the 1070s (R H C Davis and M Chibnall (eds), *The Gesta Guillelmi of William of Poitiers*, Oxford, 1998, 124–25).
- 13 *Chronicle*, 37.
- 14 *Idem*.
- 15 *Chronicle*, 39.
- 16 *Chronicle*, 41.
- 17 *Chronicle*, 43.
- 18 *Idem*.
- 19 *Chronicle*, 43, 45.
- 20 David Bates, *Regesta Regum Anglo Normannorum, The Acta of William I, 1066–1087*, nos 15 and 16, Oxford, 1998, 135–40.
- 21 Bates, *op. cit.*, 137–38.
- 22 *Chronicle*, 67.
- 23 H E J Cowdrey, 'Bishop Ermenfrid of Sion and the Penitential Ordinance following the Battle of Hastings', *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, XX, 1969, 233, n. 6.
- 24 Marc Morris has pointed out to me that, conversely, it seems more likely that the provision in the Penitential Ordinance that those who had killed unknown numbers of opponents in the battle should found a church followed rather than provoked William's foundation of Battle Abbey.
- 25 *Chronicle*, 46–47. The dedication of the completed church would not occur until 1094.
- 26 David Steward Bachrach, *Religion and the Conduct of War c.300–1215*, Woodbridge, 2003, 77; Cnut's church, built for the souls of the men who had been slain in the battle, was founded in 1020 (G N Garmonsway (ed.), *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, London 1972, 155). See also Warwick Rodwell, 'The Battle of Assunden and its memorial church: a reappraisal', in Janet Cooper (ed.), *The Battle of Maldon Fiction and Fact*, London, 1993, 142–43.
- 27 Bachrach, *op. cit.*, 76–77.
- 28 Fulk Nerra's penitential monastic foundation was to be called Belli Locus (Bachrach, *op. cit.*, 76–77).
- 29 *Chronicle*, 67. Searle argued that the abbey's foundation should be seen as a piece of good lordship on William I's part as it was 'a penitential abbey for his vassals, who had sinned out of loyalty to him' (Eleanor Searle, 'The abbey of the conquerors: defensive effortment and economic development in Anglo-Norman England', in R A Brown (ed.), *Anglo-Norman Studies: Proceedings of the Battle Conference, II, 1979*, Woodbridge 1980, 156).
- 30 *Chronicle*, 69.
- 31 *Chronicle*, 42.
- 32 *Chronicle*, 43.
- 33 Austin, *op. cit.*, 146.
- 34 Austin, *op. cit.*, 173.

- 35 I am very grateful to Jeremy Ashbee for illuminating me on this point.
- 36 In addition to William 'the Smith', the Chronicle lists four monks: Theobald 'the Old', William Coche, Robert of Boulogne and Robert Blancard (*Chronicle*, 43).
- 37 *Chronicle*, 42, n.2. Austin claims that this footnote acknowledges that the abbey was built away from the battlefield (Austin, *op. cit.*, 146–47), but this is clearly not the case. The meaning of the footnote is fully coherent with Searle's view, expressed in the introduction of her translation of the Chronicle, that there need be no doubt that 'the abbey was founded by the Conqueror, and on the scene of the battle' (*Chronicle*, 20).
- 38 *Chronicle*, 45.
- 39 *Chronicle*, 35, 39, 69.
- 40 *Chronicle*, 49, 51.
- 41 Grehan and Mace, *op. cit.*, 94.
- 42 Eleanor Searle, 'Battle Abbey and exemption: the forged charters', *English Historical Review*, LXXXIII, 1968, 453.
- 43 *Chronicle*, 155–61.
- 44 Vincent, *op. cit.*, 283. It should be noted that Vincent does not consider the reliability of *The Chronicle* for determining the location of the battle. Rather he is entirely concerned with how the Chronicle reinforced the abbey's exemption and the authenticity of its forged charters.
- 45 Austin, *Secrets*, 226; Grehan and Mace, *The Battle of Hastings 1066*, 92; 148.
- 46 *Chronicle*, 149.
- 47 Austin, *op. cit.*, 226, 'They [i.e., the monks] ... sought to create a tradition that the site where the Abbey was built was the site of the battle of Hastings'; *idem*, 227, 'the monks created a false tradition, designed to reinforce their claim to legitimately be free of taxes or church interference'; Grehan and Mace, *op. cit.*, 148, where it is claimed that the Chronicle 'is the only document that identifies the battle site as being on Battle Hill'.
- 48 The standard translation is Elisabeth van Houts (ed.), 'The Brevis Relatio de Guillelmo nobilissimo comite Normannorum, written by a monk of Battle Abbey', in Elisabeth van Houts, *History and Family Traditions in England and the Continent, 1000–1200*, Aldershot, 1999, ch. VII.
- 49 *Brevis Relatio*, 12–13; 37a–37.
- 50 *Brevis Relatio*, 14–15.
- 51 *Brevis Relatio*, 31a–32.
- 52 *Brevis Relatio*, 30a–33; 40a–40.
- 53 *Brevis Relatio*, 33a–33.
- 54 Elisabeth van Houts, 'Wace as Historian', in van Houts, *op. cit.*, ch. X, 103–06; M K Lawson, *The Battle of Hastings 1066*, Stroud, 2007, 114–15; Matthew Bennett, 'Poetry as history? The Roman de Rou as a source for the Norman Conquest', in R A Brown (ed.), *Anglo-Norman Studies*, V, 1983, 21–39.
- 55 G S Burgess (ed.), *Wace, Roman de Rou*, StHelier, 2002, 248–49.
- 56 P McGurk (ed.), *The Chronicle of John of Worcester*, III, Oxford, 1998, 155.
- 57 R A B Mynors, R M Thomson and Michael Winterbottom (eds), *William of Malmesbury: Gesta Regum Anglorum, The History of the English Kings*, I, Oxford, 1998, 493.
- 58 Elisabeth M C van Houts (ed.), *The Gesta Ducum Normannorum of William of Jumièges, Orderic Vitalis, and Robert of Torigni*, II, Oxford, 1995, 173. See Elisabeth M C van Houts (ed.), *The Gesta Ducum Normannorum of William of Jumièges, Orderic Vitalis, and Robert of Torigni*, I, Oxford 1992, lxxviii, for discussion of dates of composition for Orderic.
- 59 Marjorie Chibnall (ed.), *The Ecclesiastical History of Orderic Vitalis*, II, Oxford, 1969, 191–93. For Orderic's identification of Senlac as the place of the battle and the possibility that this referred to a sandy channel or stream, see M K Lawson, *The Battle of Hastings 1066*, Stroud, 2007, 56–58.
- 60 Diana Greenway (ed.), *Henry, Archdeacon of Huntingdon, Historia Anglorum*, Oxford, 395; lxxvi for the date of composition.
- 61 Susan Irvine (ed.), *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, A Collaborative Edition*, 7 MS E, Cambridge, 2004, lxxxv. I am very grateful to Dr Marc Morris for discussing with me the value of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle's obituary of William I.
- 62 G N Garmonsway (ed.), *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, Letchworth, 1972, xxxix; Irvine, *loc. cit.*; Lawson, *op. cit.*, 58–59.
- 63 Garmonsway, *op. cit.*, 219.
- 64 *Idem*.
- 65 Irvine, *op. cit.*, 96.
- 66 In fairness, it ought to be said that Nick Austin may be making an oblique reference to this evidence when he writes 'I don't care what the Saxon Chronicles ... tell us' (Austin, *op. cit.*, 236).
- 67 J N Hare, 'The buildings of Battle Abbey: a preliminary survey', in R A Brown (ed.), *The Proceedings of the Battle Conference on Anglo-Norman Studies*, III, 1980, Woodbridge, 1981, 80–82.
- 68 J N Hare, *Battle Abbey: The Eastern Range and the Excavations of 1978–1980*, London, 1985, 18.
- 69 Jonathan Coad, *Battle Abbey*, London, 2007, 11.
- 70 *Chronicle*, 43.
- 71 Grehan and Mace, *op. cit.*, 112.
- 72 The provision of the *leuga* to the abbey by William I is recorded in Domesday (Eleanor Searle, 'Hides, Virgates and Tenant Settlement at Battle Abbey', *Economic History Review*, XVI, 1963, 290–91). Although comparable to the bodies of land enjoyed by many early castles, the most recent general survey of English castles considers Battle's *leuga* to be an indicator of the special status of both the abbey and the battle it commemorated (John Goodall, *The English Castle*, New Haven and London, 2011, 69).
- 73 Grehan and Mace, *op. cit.*, 111–12.
- 74 Searle, *Abbey of the Conquerors*, *cit.* at n. 29, 164.
- 75 *Ibid.*, 156. This point is ignored in Grehan and Mace's rehearsal of Searle's argument (Grehan and Mace, *op. cit.*, 111–12).
- 76 Conversely, where historic ground surfaces have been buried by later deposits battle-related archaeology may have survived.
- 77 Austin, *op. cit.*, 137–38, 142; Grehan and Mace, *op. cit.*, 5, 141–46.
- 78 Grehan and Mace's assertion that the remit of the investigations of the late 1970s was to 'excavate the eastern part of Battle ridge' (Grehan and Mace, *op. cit.*, 143) is misleading. Hare's report makes clear that excavation was limited to the area immediately east of the east claustral range, the chapter house, the south transept of the abbey church and the reredorter (Hare, *Battle Abbey: The Eastern Range ...*, *cit.*, 16). Hare also describes the character of previous archaeological investigation at the abbey.
- 79 In this instance Battle is not exceptional; archaeological material related to battlefields earlier than the Wars of the Roses is uncommon (Glenn Foard and Richard Morris, *The Archaeology of English Battlefields: Conflict in the Pre-Industrial Landscape*, CBA Reports, 2012, 22–24).

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