

Wace and his Authorities

IN studying the authorities for the battle of Hastings, I have been led to a conclusion which, so far as I know, has never yet occurred to any one. It is that William of Malmesbury's 'Gesta Regum' was among the sources used by Wace. Neither in Körting's elaborate treatise, 'Ueber die Quellen des Roman de Rou,' nor in Andresen's notes to his well-known edition of the 'Roman' (ii. 708), can I find any suggestion to this effect. Dr. Stubbs, in his edition of the 'Gesta Regum,' dwells on the popularity of the work both at home and abroad, but does not include Wace among the writers who availed themselves of it; and the late Mr. Freeman, though frequently compelled to notice the agreement between Wace and William, never thought, it appears, of suggesting the theory of derivation; indeed, he speaks of the two writers as independent witnesses, when dealing with one of these coincidences.¹ The more one studies Wace, the more evident it becomes that the 'Roman' requires to be used with the greatest caution. Based on a *congeries* of authorities, on tradition, and occasionally of course, on the poetic invention of the *trouveur*, it presents a whole in which it is almost impossible to disentangle the various sources of the narrative. Before dealing with the passage which led me to believe that the 'Gesta Regum' must have been known to Wace, I will glance at some other coincidences. We have first the alleged landing of William at Hastings instead of Pevensey. On this Mr. Freeman observed:

Venit ad Pevenesæ, says the Tapestry. So William of Poitiers and William of Jumièges. William of Malmesbury says carelessly, *Placido cursu Hastings appulerunt*. So Wace, who altogether reverses the geography, making the army land at Hastings and go to Pevensey afterwards.²

Here William of Malmesbury, who was probably using 'Hastingas' as loosely as when he applied that term to Battle, appears to be responsible for the mistake of Wace, who may have tried to harmonise him with William of Jumièges by making the Normans proceed to Pevensey after having landed. Take again the hotly dis-

¹ *Norm. Conq.* iii. 788.

² iii. 402, n. 2.

puted burial of Harold at Waltham. On this question Mr. Freeman writes :

William of Malmesbury, after saying that the body was given to Gytha, adds, *acceptum itaque apud Waltham sepelivit*. . . . Wace had evidently heard two or three stories, and with his usual discretion, he avoided committing himself, but he distinctly asserts a burial at Waltham.³

This then is another coincidence between the two writers, while, as before, Wace found himself in the presence of a conflict of authorities. On yet another difficult point, the accession of Harold, I see a marked agreement, though Mr. Freeman did not. Harold, according to William of Malmesbury, *extorta a principibus fide, arripuit diadema, and diademate fastigiatus, nihil de pactis inter se et Willelmum cogitabat*. Wace's version runs :—

Heraut ki ert manant è forz
Se fist énoindre è coroner ;
Unkes al duc n'en volt parler,
Homages prist è féeltez
Des plus riches è des ainz nes.

Not only is the attitude of Wace and William towards Harold's action here virtually identical, but the mention of his exaction of homage seems special to them both.

The passages, however, on which I would specially rest my case are those in which these two writers describe the visit of Harold's spies to the Norman camp before the battle of Hastings. This legend is peculiar to William of Malmesbury and Wace, and though it may be suggested that they had heard it independently, the correspondence—it will, I think, be admitted—is too close to admit of that solution.

WILLIAM OF MALMESBURY.

Praemisit tamen qui numerum hostium et vires specularentur.

Quos intra castra deprehensos Willelmus circum tentoria duoi, moxque, largis eduliis pastos, domino incolumes remitti jubet.

Redeuntes percunctatur Haroldus quid rerum appor-

WACE.

Heraut envela dous espies
Por espier quels compagnies
E quanz barons e quanz armez
Aueit li dus od sei menex.

La esteient a l'ost uenu,
Quant il furent aparceu
A Guillaume furent mena,
Forment furent espoente.
Mais quant il sout que il queireient
E que ses ganz esmar ueneient,
Par tos les tres les fist mener
E tote l'ost lor fist mostrer ;
Bien les fist paistre e abeurer,
Pois les laissa quites alar,
Nes volt laidir ne destorber.

Quant il vindrent a lor seignor,
Del duc distrent mult grant enor.

* iii. 782.

tent: illi, verbis amplissimis
 ductoris magnificam confi-
 dentiam prosecuti, serio ad-
 diderunt pene omnes in ex-
 ercitu illo presbyteros videri,
 quod totam faciem cum
 utroque labio rasam habe-
 rent; . . . subrisit rex fatui-
 tatem referentium, lepido in-
 secutus cachinno, quia non
 essent presbyteri, sed milites
 validi, armis invicti.

(§ 289).

Un des Engleis, qui ont veuz
 Les Normanz toz res e tonduz,
 Quida que tuit prouaire fussent
 E que messes chanter peussent,
 Kar tuit erent tondu e res,
 Ne lor esteit guarnon remes.
 Cil dist a Heraut que li dus
 Aueit od sei prouies plus
 Que chevaliers ne altre gent;
 De co se merueillout forment
 Que tuit erent res e tondu.
 E Heraut li a respondu
 Que co sunt cheualiers uallanz,
 Hardi e proz e combatanz.
 'N'ont mie barbes ne guernons,'
 Co dist Heraut, 'com nos auons.'

(ll. 7101-84).

The story is just one of those that William of Malmesbury would have picked up, and Wace has simply, in metrical paraphrase, transferred it from his pages to his own.

Yet another story, on which Mr. Freeman looked with some just suspicion, is common to these two writers, and virtually to them alone. It is that of 'the contrast between the way in which the night before the battle was spent by the Normans and the English' (iii. 760). Wace, says Mr. Freeman, 'gives us the same account' as William 'in more detail,' while William 'gives us a shorter account.' I here again append the passages side by side, insisting on the fact mentioned by Mr. Freeman that Wace expands the story 'in more detail.'

Itaque utrinque animosi
 duces disponunt acies. . . .
 Angli, ut accepimus, totam
 noctem insomniam cantibus
 potibusque ducentes.

Contra Normanni, nocte
 tota confessioni peccatorum
 vacantes, mane Dominico
 corpore communicarunt.

(§§ 241, 242.)

Quant la bataille dut ioster,
 La nuit auant, c'oi conter,
 Furent Engleis forment haitie,
 Mult riant e mult enueisie.
 Tote nuit maingierent e burent,
 Onques la nuit en lit ne jurent.
 Mult les veissiez demener,
 Treper e saillir e chanter.

E li Normant e li Franceis
 Tote nuit firent oreisons
 E furent en afflictions.
 De lor pechiez confes se firent,
 As prouaires les regehrent,
 E qui nen out prouaires pres,
 A son veisin se fist confes.

Quant les messes furent chantees,
 Qui bien matin furent finees, . . .

(ll. 7849-56, 7862-68, 7407-8.)

This brings me to the key of the position, namely, § 241 of the 'Gesta Regum.' We may divide this section into three

successive parts: (1) the description of the way in which the English spent the night—which is repeated, we have seen, by Wace; (2) the array of the English, with which I shall deal below; (3) the dismounting of Harold at the foot of the standard. I here subjoin the parallels for the third, calling special attention to the phrases *d'or e de pierres (auro et lapidibus)* and *Guill. pois cele victoire Le fist porter a l'apostoire (post victoriam papae misit Willelmus)*.

Rex ipse pedes juxta vexillum stabat cum fratribus, ut, in commune periculo aequato, nemo de fuga cogitaret. Vexillum illud post victoriam papae misit Willelmus, quod erat in hominis pugnantis figura, auro et lapidibus arte sumptuosa intextum.

Quant Heraut out tot apreste
E ço qu'il uolt out commande,
Enmi les Engleis est uenuz,
Lez l'estandart est descenduz.
Lewine e Guert furent od lui,
Frere Heraut furent andui,
Assez out barons enuiron;
Heraut fu lez son gonfanon.
Li gonfanon fu mult vaillanz,
D'or e de pierres reluissanz.
Guill. pois cele victoire
Le fist porter a l'apostoire,
Por mostrer e metre en memoire
Son grant conquest e sa grant gloire.

(ll. 7858-66.)

The only part of § 241 which remains to be dealt with is the second. The two passages run thus:—

Pedites omnes cum bipennis, conserta ante se scutorum testudine, impenetrabilem cuneum faciunt; quod profecto illis ea die saluti fuisset, nisi Normanni, simulata fuga more suo confertos manipulos laxassent.

(§ 241.)

Geldons engleis haches portoent
E gisarmes qui bien trenchoent;
Fait orent deuant els escuz
De fenestres e d'autres fuz,
Deuant els les orent leuez,
Comme cleies joinz e serrez;
Fait en orent deuant closture,
N'i laisserent nule iointure,
Par onc Normant entr'els venist
Qui desconfire les volsist.
D'escuz e d'ais s'auironoent,
Isi deffendre se quidoent;
Et s'il se fussent bien tenu,
Ia ne fussent le ior uenu.

(ll. 7818-26.)

Mr. Freeman, of course, observed the parallel, but, oddly enough, missed the point. He first quoted the lines from Wace, and then immediately added 'So William of Malmesbury' (iii. 764), thus reversing the natural order. The word that really gave me the clue was the *escuz* of Wace. It is obvious that, here as elsewhere, it must mean 'shield;' and Mr. Freeman consequently saw in the passage an undoubted description of the 'shield-wall' (iii. 763). Moreover, the phrase *lever escuz* is, in Wace, a familiar one, describing preparation for action, thus, for instance:

Mult neissiez Engleis fremir,

Armes saisir, escuz leuer.

(ll. 8030, 8038.)

On the other hand, there are, in spite of Mr. Freeman, undoubted difficulties in rendering the passage as a description of the 'shield-wall,' just as there are in taking *escuz* to mean 'barricades' (iii. 471). The result was that, perhaps unconsciously, Mr. Freeman gave the passage two contradictory renderings (iii. 471, 763). Now, starting from the fact that the disputed passage supported, and also opposed both renderings, I arrived at the conclusion that it must represent some confusion of Wace's own. He had, evidently, himself no clear idea of what he was describing. But the whole confusion is at once accounted for if we admit him to have, here also, followed William of Malmesbury. His *escuz*—otherwise impossible to explain—faithfully renders the *scuta* of William, while the latter's *testudo*, though strictly accurate, clearly led him astray. The fact is that William of Malmesbury must have been quite familiar with the 'shield-wall,' if indeed he had not seen the fyrd actually forming it.⁴ Wace, on the contrary, living later, and in Normandy instead of England, cannot have seen, or even understood, this famous formation with which his cavalry fight of the twelfth century had nothing in common. It is natural therefore that his version should betray some confusion, though his *Fait en orent deuant closture* clearly renders William of Malmesbury's *conserta ante se scutorum testudine*. There is no question as to William's meaning, for a *testudo* of shields is excellent Latin for the shield-wall formed by the Romans against a flight of arrows.⁵ Moreover, the construction of William's Latin (*conserta*) accounts for that use by Wace of the pluperfect tense on which stress has been laid as proof that the passage must describe a 'barricade.'⁶ That Wace could, occasionally, be led astray by misunderstanding his authority, is shown by his taking Harold to Abbeville, after his capture on the French coast, a statement which arose, in Mr. Freeman's opinion, 'from a misconception of the words of William of Jumièges (iii. 224).' No one, I think, can read dispassionately the extracts I have printed side by side, without accepting the explanation I offer of this disputed passage in Wace, namely, that it is nothing but a metrical,

⁴ He describes, as Mr. Freeman observed, King Henry bidding the English 'meet the charge of the Norman knights by standing firm in the array of the ancient shield-wall' (*W. Rufus*, ii. 411).

⁵ Thus, for instance, Livy writes: 'Testudo est cum conglobati milites et scuta scutis arcte iungentes, invicem se protegunt, et ingruentia tela defendunt: Graeci σπασσιμβν dicunt' (xxxiv. 89). We may compare the passage in Æthelred of Rievaulx which Mr. Freeman (iii. 764) aptly quoted in illustration of William of Malmesbury's 'testudo': 'scutis scuta junguntur, lateribus latera conseruntur.'

⁶ *Contemp. Rev.* March 1893, p. 351.

elaborate, and somewhat confused, paraphrase of the words of William of Malmesbury.

Passing from William of Malmesbury to the Bayeux Tapestry, we find a general recognition of the difficulty of determining Wace's knowledge of it. I can only, like others, leave the point undecided. On the one hand, his narrative, as a whole, does not follow the Tapestry; on the other, it is hard to believe that the writer of ll. 8103-8198 had not seen that famous work. His description of the scene is marvellously exact, and the Tapestry phrase, in which Odo *confortat pueros*—often a subject of discussion—is at once explained by his making the *pueri* whom Odo 'comforted' to be—

Vaslez, qui al herneis esteient
E le herneis garder deueient.

Of these varlets in charge of the 'harness' he had already spoken (ll. 7968-7). The difficulty of accounting for Wace, as a canon of Bayeux, being unacquainted with the Tapestry is, of course, obvious. But in any case he cannot have used it, as we do ourselves, among his foremost authorities.

In discussing his use of William of Jumièges, we stand on much surer ground. It certainly strikes one as strange that in mentioning the obvious error by which Wace makes Harold receive his wound in the eye early in the fight (l. 8185), before the great feigned flight, Mr. Freeman does not suggest its derivation from William of Jumièges, though he proceeds to add (p. 771):—

I need hardly stop to refute the strange mistake of William of Jumièges, followed by Orderic; *Heraldus ipse in primo militum progressu* ['Congressu,' *Ord.*] *vulneribus letaliter confossus occubuit*.

But a worse instance of the contradictions involved by the patchwork and secondary character of his narrative is found in his statements as to Harold's arrival on the field of battle. 'Wace,' says Mr. Freeman, 'makes the English reach Senlac on Thursday night' (p. 441). So he does, even adding that Harold

fist son estandart drecier
Et fist son gonfanon fichier
Iloc tot dreit ou l'abeie
De la Bataille est estable. (ll. 6985-8.)

But Mr. Freeman must have overlooked the very significant fact that when the battle is about to begin, Wace tells a different story, and makes Harold only occupy the battle-field on the Saturday morning.

Heraut sout que Normant vendreient
E que par main se combatreient :
Un champ out *par matin* porpris,
Ou il a toz ses Engleis mis.
Par matin les fist toz armer
E a bataille conreer. (ll. 7768-72.)

I have little doubt that he here follows William of Jumièges (*Heraldus in campo belli apparuit mane*) and that he was thus led to contradict himself.

Mr. Freeman had a weakness for Wace, and did not conceal it: he insisted on the poet's 'honesty.' But 'honesty' is not knowledge; and in dealing with the battle, it is not allowable to slur over Wace's imperfect knowledge. Mr. Freeman admits that 'probably he did not know the ground, and did not take in the distance between Hastings and Battle' (p. 762). But he charitably suggests that 'it is possible that when he says *en un tertre s'estut li dus* he meant the hill of Telham, only without any notion of its distance from Hastings.' But, in spite of this attempt to smooth over the discrepancy, it is impossible to reconcile Wace's narrative with that of Mr. Freeman. The latter makes the duke deliver his speech at Hastings and then march with his knights to Telham and there arm. But Wace imagined that they armed in their quarters at Hastings (*Issi sunt as tentes ale*), and straightway fought. The events immediately preceding the battle are far more doubtful and difficult to determine than could be imagined from Mr. Freeman's narrative, but I must confine myself to Wace's version. I have shown that his account is not consistent, as to the movements of Harold, while as to the topography, 'his primary blunder,' as Mr. Freeman terms it, 'of reversing the geographical order, by making William land at Hastings and thence go to Pevensey,' together with his obvious ignorance of the character and position of the battle-field, must, of course, lower our opinion of his accuracy, and of the value of the oral tradition at his disposal. Honest and industrious, no doubt, he was, but the tendency, however unconscious, to treat him as an original authority for the events of the Conquest, has, I think, been carried too far.

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