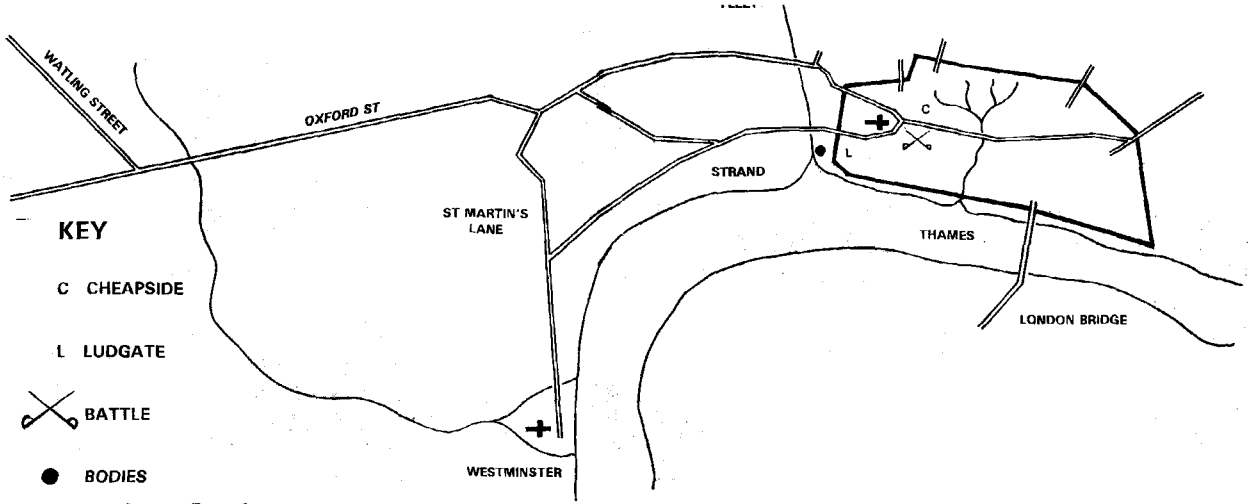

Fig. 1: Late Saxon London

The Battle of London 1066

Peter Mills

Documentary sources and archaeological material from excavations in the Fleet valley suggest that a now forgotten battle took place at London in December 1066. The evidence for the battle and its aftermath are given below.

Hastings to Berkhamsted

BY THE END of Saturday 14th October 1066 William the Bastard, Duke of Normandy and claimant to the English throne, was the victor of the Battle of Hastings. Some 5,000 Saxon and Norman troops lay dead and the English had fled the field. However, William was aware that complete victory and the crown were not yet within his grasp. Two of the most powerful Saxon lords, the Earls Edwin and Morcar, had not been present at the battle and English ships could easily cut off his communications with Normandy. Furthermore, London had yet to be seized.

Some Saxon magnates hoped that London could be held and another army raised in the name of Edgar the Aetheling, last of the Saxon royal line. William knew that London must be taken to secure the kingdom, but was circumspect about making a direct assault on the City. He rested his men for five days then started an indirect but menacing approach.

First, he headed east to the small town of Romney where he "imposed a punishment"[1] then marched on Dover, which surrendered without a struggle. Having secured his southern flank William turn north-west, marching along the old Roman road to Canterbury. He had hardly begun his approach when a deputation met him, gave him hostages and swore allegiance to him. His advance was delayed for a month by a bout of dysentery but even from his sick bed William extracted the submission of Winchester and obtained control of the royal treasury there.

William then marched on London. The supporters of Edgar the Aetheling did not attempt to block William's path until his advance guard reached the southern end of London Bridge. Here the Normans encountered fierce resistance and his horsemen were driven back by the English. William burnt Southwark to the ground but could not take the bridge by storm. William moved west, ravaging the countryside, until he crossed the Thames at Wallingford where his forces encamped. At that point Archbishop Stigand, a leading member of

1. William of Poitiers *Gesta Willelmi ducis Normannorum* (ed. J. A. Giles) in *Scriptores rerum gestarum Willelmi Conquestoris* (1845) 139.

the Aetheling party, came to Wallingford and swore loyalty to William. The isolation of London continued as William marched up the Icknield Way to Berkhamsted, his soldiers ransacking the countryside in their path. Here, finally, the leading Saxons, including Edgar the Aetheling, Edwin and Morcar, swore fealty to William as their position had become increasingly perilous[2].

The Capture of London December 1066

William again marched on London, his troops still burning and destroying, but the final sequence of events at London is unclear. The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle (D) jumps from events in Berkhamsted to King William returning to England from Normandy in 1067[3]. Three contemporary French sources describing events before William's coronation suggest possible or actual continued Saxon resistance.

William of Poitiers (1073-5) says the City surrendered as soon as the Duke came in sight. Elsewhere, however, Poitiers records William and his advisers deciding he should be crowned as soon as possible so that "men would hesitate to rebel against him or, if they did so, would be more easily crushed". This suggests the Normans anticipated further resistance even though the leading Saxons had reportedly implored him to be their king[4].

Guy of Amiens (1068) in a florid panegyric poem records that William, having established his headquarters at Westminster, prepared to besiege London by constructing "siege-engines and made moles and the iron horns of battering-rams to destroy the City"[5]. He then threatened to "destroy the City wall, reduce the bastions to sand and bring down the proud tower in rubble"[6]. He secretly negotiated with Ansgar, the foremost man[7], but also besieged the City: "The siege-engine on the huge mound that has been raised overtops the towers and the ramparts fall, riven by the blows of stones. With many falls in all parts collapse is imminent". This led to a delegation presenting William with the keys of the City[8]. Clearly, William had not been able to rely on the Saxon nobles, despite their obeisance at Berkhamsted, to deliver the peaceful acquiescence of London.

The third source, William of Jumieges, (c 1071) presents a more forthright account. He says that "indeed he [William] attacked Lundonia: and there the soldiers who came as the advance guard found a vast number of rebels in an open space of the City. They [the rebels] resisted, fighting with every means possible. Immediately having engaged them in battle they [the Normans] caused no little mourning to the City because of the very many deaths of her own sons and citizens. The people of Lundonia seeing finally that they could not stand any longer against them handed over hostages and all their property to the most noble victor [William]"[9].

Clear corroboration that William had met stiff resistance is given by his and his troops' actions after taking the City. During the coronation in Westminster Abbey on Christmas Day 1066 the Saxon and Norman congregation shouted their acceptance of William as king. The panicky Norman guards outside the Abbey assumed an attack had begun so set fire to adjacent buildings[10], an act laconically described by the chronicler as "imprudent". More tellingly the newly crowned king then retreated to Barking, Essex, "while certain strongholds were made in the town against the fickleness of the vast and fierce population. For he saw that his first necessity was the task of coercing the Londoners"[11]. The strongholds he built were the proto-castle later to become the Tower of London on the east and either Montfichet Tower or Baynard's Castle to the west, between Ludgate and the Thames. This jittery behaviour of William and his men indicates that some Londoners at least had demonstrated a willingness to resist Norman rule by force.

Site of the Battle of London

Documentary sources and archaeological evidence give an indication of the route the Normans took and the site of the battle (Fig. 1). When William's troops moved south in mid-December 1066 from Berkhamsted down Watling Street (Edgware Road), they approach London from the west, initially travelling on what is now Oxford Street. At St Giles High Street William turned south down St Martin's Lane and secured the royal palace at Westminster. Following that, William's army moved east to the City along the Strand, reached the bridge over the Fleet and faced Ludgate. There his troops established siegeworks.

2. *Anglo Saxon Chronicles* (trans and ed A. Savage) (1983) 195.
3. *Ibid.*, 194-5.
4. *Op cit* fn 1, 141-2.
5. Guy of Amiens *Carmen de Bello Hastingensi or Carmen de Hastingae Proelio* (ed J. A. Giles) in *Scriptores rerum gestarum Willelmi Conquestoris* (1845); C. Morton and H. Muntz (trans & ed) *Carmen de Hastingae Proelio of Guy of Amiens* (1972).
6. *Ibid.*, 46.
7. *Ibid.*, 47.
8. *Ibid.*, 48.
9. William of Jumieges *Historiae Normannorum Libri VIII* (ed A. Duchesne in *Historiae Normannorum Antiqui* (1619) 288 and Van Houts, E., trans & ed, *Gesta Normannorum Ducum Vol. II Books V - VIII* (1995).
10. *Op cit* fn. 1, 143.
11. *Op cit* fn. 1, 147-8.

By the late 11th century Ludgate, one of the western gates mentioned in AD 857[12], was probably the major western gate of London, the Fleet Street/Strand/Whitehall road leading to the abbey and palace at Westminster. Stow said Ludgate provided the principal early 12th century western access to the City[13] and excavations at Ludgate Circus have revealed the presence of a massive late Saxon timber bridge abutment where the road crossed the Fleet[14], so demonstrating the contemporary importance of the gateway. The later construction of Baynard's Castle and Montfichet's Tower[15] at Ludgate shows the importance the Normans placed on that western access point. Indeed, the "proud tower" threatened by William may have been Ludgate itself or the late Saxon precursor of one of those fortifications.

The robust defence of London Bridge suggests any armed resistance would have been intended to prevent the Normans gaining entry to the City. Amiens records that due to its defences and "contrary inhabitants" London "neither fears enemies nor dreads being taken by storm"[16]. There would have been no incentive for the Londoners, secure behind formidable defences, to sally forth to fight the Normans outside the walls, although Stenton thought it possible fighting took place beyond the walls[17]. It appears that after a brief siege and secret negotiations the City gates were opened and the Normans entered through Ludgate. From there the main route into the City passed south of St Paul's (the 11th-century cathedral probably lay north of the present church) then curved north-east to Cheapside.

William of Jumieges says the battle occurred "in platea urbis". In mediaeval Latin *platea* can mean a wide street but also an open space or square, hence 'plaza'. Our knowledge of late Saxon London is limited but such evidence as we have indicates the walled area was fairly densely occupied. However,

12. P. Hunting *Ludgate* (1993) 37.
13. J. Stow *Survey of London* (ed. C. L. Kingsford) (1908) 37.
14. W. McCann *Ludgate Hill Sites – An Archaeological Assessment.* Unpublished MoLAS Report (1992) 16.
15. B. Watson 'The Excavation of a Norman Fortress on Ludgate Hill' *London Archaeol* 6, no. 14 (1992) 371-7.
16. *Op cit* fn. 5, 45.
17. F. M. Stenton *Anglo-Saxon England* (1943) 589.

Fig. 2: late Saxon burials found on the Fleet foreshore. (Photo: MoLAS)

there were some open spaces and broad streets, the most notable being the Folkmoot by St Paul's and Cheapside.

So it seems that, although the gates had been opened to William as part of the surrender agreement, there was still an attack by "rebels" on the Normans once inside the City. The junction of Cheapside and the Folkmoot would certainly fulfil the description of an "open place of the City" and would have been an obvious place for a crowd to gather. The admittedly sparse evidence suggests that the west end of Cheapside should be regarded as the most likely site of the battle.

The Fleet Valley

Following the fighting the dead would need to be cleared and archaeology may provide some details of the battle's aftermath.

Excavations as part of the Fleet Valley Project have shown that the land between the City walls and the Fleet "was apparently abandoned" and that "the promontory [at the junction of the Thames and Fleet] remained bleak and relatively uninhabited ... throughout the Roman period ... and much of the succeeding Saxon period"[18]. Not until the "very Late Saxon period" was there any evidence of activity there. This late Saxon activity was a number of "unusual" burials south-west of Ludgate which the ceramic evidence dates to *c* 1050 to 1100[19]. Eleven bodies were found but only three skulls. The bodies, buried on the Fleet foreshore, were partially covered with stones and may have been dismembered before burial (Fig. 2). When excavated it was suggested that they may have been the victims of either battle or personal feud. Due to the difficult circumstances of the excavation it is not known whether the bodies were buried in a communal pit or not. Eight of the bodies have been subject to a preliminary examination: the group comprised one woman, three men and four adolescents, including at least one male[20].

The date of the burials agrees with the documentary evidence for a battle, and the presence of adolescents recalls Jumieges's mention of "sons" being killed, suggesting juveniles were amongst the battle casualties[21]. The burial of mutilated bodies, under stones, on a promontory is also strangely reminiscent of William's actions after the Battle of Hastings: he ordered the mutilated body of Harold to be buried "under a heap of stones" on a promontory[22].

18. W. McCann *Fleet Valley Project.* Unpublished MOLAS Report (1993) 47.

19. L. Blackmore *Post-Roman Pottery Phasing* in McCann (1993) 47; Blackmore *pers. comm.*

It is certainly feasible that these Fleet Valley burials represent some of the dead from the Battle of London.

Conclusions

There is an explicit assertion from a contemporary source that a battle took place at London between the Saxons and Normans in 1066. There is direct evidence that William, if not frightened of, was at least extremely wary of the London populace after his coronation. This indirectly confirms the Norman occupation of the City had been resisted. Furthermore, we know William had his base at Westminster and that Ludgate was the major western gate of the City, so likely to have been the gate approached by the Norman troops. The battle was fought in an open space of the City. The discovery of bodies, apparently victims of violence, just outside Ludgate, may provide evidence for the disposal of the dead.

Pulling the various strands of evidence together one can suggest a sequence of events following the Battle of Hastings. The major Saxon nobles reluctantly decided to accept William as their king but within the City, which even at that point retained considerable independence of kings and nobles, there were Londoners prepared to resist the Normans. About 20th December 1066 the City authorities surrendered and opened Ludgate to William but a large, hostile crowd had gathered near St Paul's. They fought a fierce battle and the Londoners were slaughtered. After the Battle of London the dead were buried outside Ludgate on a desolate promontory of the Fleet.

In the end the resistance by Saxon Londoners was doomed. William had an efficient, experienced army and the English earls and bishops had accepted William as the legitimate heir of Edward the Confessor. As William of Poitiers remarked "he was crowned at last with the consent of the English, or at least at the desire of their magnates"[23].

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20. *Op cit* fn. 18, 46.

21. *Op cit* fn 9, 288.

22. *Op cit* fn 5, 44.

23. *Op cit* fn 1, 143.