

Jörg Peltzer, 1066. Der Kampf um Englands Krone, München (C. H. Beck) 2016, 432 S., 36 Abb., 9 Kt., 6 Stammtaf., ISBN 978-3-406-69750-0, EUR 24,95.

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Mittelalter – Moyen Âge (500–1500)

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Seite | page 1

1066 is the most famous date in English history, the year in which Harold Godwinson, the last of the Anglo-Saxon kings, fell in battle against the Norman duke, William, who duly proceeded to obtain the throne and subdue the English kingdom. It is no less a turning point in Scandinavian history, for the Norwegian king, Harald Hardrada, had been killed fighting his English namesake three weeks before Harold's death at the Battle of Hastings, and the failure of his invasion, for many scholars, marks the end of the Second Viking Age. Although the date is famous in England and France, it is less well known in Germany, partly because few German chroniclers noticed the events at the time – even Irish annalists failed to report them – but also because so few German scholars in modern times have involved themselves in what has largely been a »cross-channel« debate. The paucity of German-language secondary literature in Peltzer's bibliography is a testimony not only to the past neglect of the subject among German scholars, but also to the importance of his own contribution, in writing a book both insightful and learned, yet accessible to the general reader. Peltzer, moreover, possesses a narrative style which manages to be erudite and reflective while also compelling and even, one might say, stirring; and he weaves together the many different threads of the story with a mastery of tension and resolution which positively compels the reader to turn each page.

After an informed and succinct discussion of the sources (which emphasises the importance of contemporary writers rather than making the all too common mistake or relying too much upon 12th-century legend), the scene is set with a sketching out of Anglo-Scandinavian and Anglo-Norman relations up to the reign of Edward the Confessor, an introduction to the English kingdom and its personnel (properly depicting the denizens of the pre-Gregorian world as both spiritual and worldly), and finally a rather ominous section on the waging of war, including photographic images of contemporary arms and weapons of the sort shortly to be put to the test in 1066.

The next chapters interweave the stories of the protagonists, Harold Godwinson and William, the future conqueror, setting out their backgrounds and respective interests in the throne. Pivotal episodes in the power-struggle between these men (and other key players) are dealt with in separate chapters, the first of which, chapter 5, concerns Harold's much debated expedition to Normandy (generally dated to 1064); the second, chapter 6, addresses the conflict between the brothers Harold and Tostig, Edward the Confessor's two most powerful earls, which broke to the surface in 1065 and hastened the old king's demise. Peltzer finds common ground in the account seemingly given by the Bayeux Tapestry and the story told by the monk Eadmer, who claims that Harold crossed to Normandy with a view to recovering the hostages – a brother and a nephew of the earl – who had fallen into William's hands in 1051–1052, and to broker a marriage alliance. It is clear, however, that both princes were already plotting for the throne, ambitions which would spill over to energise the rivalry between Harold and



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Tostig which is the subject of chapter 6.

After Harold's coronation, Peltzer's emphasis shifts to the ways in which rival claimants tried to build their case for his violent overthrow - what he calls the narrative of legitimization, looking first at the case constructed by William and his agents in early 1066, drawing on the work of scholars such as George Garnett. Harald Hardrada's case for conquest is given its own chapter, a welcome development in a largely Anglo-French debate which historically has tended to dismiss it. The battles are given the attention they deserve, amounting to a sensible reading of the sources without the kind of elaborate analysis already provided by Jim Bradbury, Stephen Morillo and Michael Kenneth Lawson. Then there is a grand and panoramic overview of the progress of the conquest and subjugation of England up to William's death in 1087. Peltzer describes this as the terror that followed the slaughter. He is rightly not shy about the conqueror's brutality. Finally, he turns to the consequences of the Norman settlement.

There can be no doubt that Peltzer's book is a great achievement, which will introduce the scholarship to wholly new audiences. Equally adept in his handling of sources, character, events and great sweeps of history, the author has demonstrated his considerable credentials. It is not necessarily a criticism to observe that his interpretations are sometimes conservative, erring on the side of caution by reiterating long-established opinions rather than aligning with revisionist ideas. For example, Peltzer seems to be content with the »Encomium's« claim that in 1041 Edward, the future Confessor, was recalled to England by his mother Emma, to co-reign with Harthacnut (p. 38), although there are other ways of reading his return. Nor does he depart from the traditional view of Edward as a weak monarch largely in Harold's power – a view popularised by E. A. Freeman in the 19th century. We are told on p. 138 that Harold's strong position made it unlikely that Edward could have induced him to do anything he did not want to do, let alone go on a mission to Normandy if it was against his wishes. Yet this traditional view is at odds with recent work by Stephen Baxter, showing that the earls were not as secure in their offices as is sometimes claimed. Indeed, great earls fell rapidly and precipitously at various points in the reign, although most managed a comeback. Peltzer, of course, does not make it his mission to rewrite the history of the Norman Conquest, and he grounds his choice of opinions in venerable historiographical traditions and in his impressive familiarity with the literature. His book brings many fresh perspectives to the table, and will be welcomed for its masterly retelling of momentous events.

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Seite | page 2



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