In September 1066, William, Duke of Normandy, set sail from St Valéry with his army, to overthrow King Harold. The Norman army landed at Pevensey in East Sussex, unchallenged. After quickly building a motte and bailey castle, William led his army on to Hastings. King Harold, fresh from defeating Harald Hardrada, King of Norway, at the Battle of Stamford Bridge in Yorkshire, marched his battle-weary men south to meet William.

Both armies are thought to have been between 5,000 and 7,000 soldiers – large armies for the time. Both used mostly similar weapons and armor: horses, helmets, mail armor, shields, swords and bows. The differences were key: the Normans used crossbows and cavalry, and the English used foot soldiers and the terrifying housecarls (highly disciplined soldiers). William learnt of Harold’s approach the day before the battle and moved his forces 7 miles inland from Hastings. Overnight, the two armies were camped within sight of each other. Soon after dawn on 14 October, Harold arranged his forces into a shield wall along the ridge of the hill (where the buildings of Battle Abbey stand today). William’s army to the south split into three ranks, with archers at the front, infantry in the middle and cavalry at the back. At 9am, trumpets signaled the start of the battle. The two armies were so evenly matched that the battle lasted for about nine hours. The Normans repeatedly attacked the English line, which mostly held firm, except for a few breaks in rank to chase after sections of William’s troops that were, or pretended to be, retreating. To stop the rumors that he had been killed, which had begun to spread, William rode out in front of his troops and lifted his helmet to show them that he was still in command. With daylight fading, the Normans launched their final assault. King Harold was killed, probably fatally wounded by an arrow that pierced his brain through his eye. Leaderless, the remaining English forces fled.

William the Conqueror was crowned king in Westminster Abbey on 25 December 1066.

Despite defeating Harold, there was much resistance against the new king from all around the country. William reinforced his authority by defeating the rebellions and giving land to his supporters. Religious leaders were powerful and important, so he replaced all Anglo-Saxon bishops and abbots with Normans. He ordered many new churches, cathedrals and castles to be built. These became a powerful statement of the authority of the new ruling power and were on a scale previously unseen in England.

William's strategy, implemented in the year 1070 in order to deal with the Anglo-Saxon rebellions in the north has been considered, by some scholars to be an act of genocide, known as the Harrying of the North. Writing about the Harrying of the North, over fifty years later, the Anglo-Norman chronicler Orderic Vitalis wrote:

The King stopped at nothing to hunt his enemies. He cut down many people and destroyed homes and land. Nowhere else had he shown such cruelty. This made a real change.

To his shame, William made no effort to control his fury, punishing the innocent with the guilty. He ordered that crops and herds, tools and food be burned to ashes. More than 100,000 people perished of starvation.

I have often praised William in this book, but I can say nothing good about this brutal slaughter. God will punish him.

1. How long was the Battle of Hastings?

2. How did William the Conqueror try to reinforce his authority in England?

3. How does Orderic Vitalis describe the Harrying of the North?

4. Place yourself in the role of William. How would you have gone about dealing with the rebellions in the north?