

Military Technology and Political Resistance: Castles, Fleets and the Changing Face of Comital Rebellion in England and Normandy, c. 1026–1087

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In 1075, Roger earl of Hereford and Ralph earl of Norfolk and Suffolk “fortified their castles (*castella*), prepared weapons, mustered their knights, and sent messengers to all far and near whom they trusted” in order to raise support for a major rising against the rule of William the Conqueror.¹ With the aid of Danish allies, the rebels aimed, or so Orderic Vitalis believed, “to drive their royal lord out of the kingdom” and to divide the rule of England between Roger, Ralph, and Waltheof, the last surviving Anglo-Saxon earl, whom they had drawn into their conspiracy.² King William’s regents, headed by Archbishop Lanfranc, succeeded in putting down the rising, but the “revolt of the earls” marked an important turning point in the initial stage of the Norman conquest and settlement.³ Forfeitures following the rising’s failure not only profoundly disrupted the nature of Breton settlement but also led to more widespread

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- 1 *The Ecclesiastical History of Orderic Vitalis*, ed. and trans. Marjorie Chibnall (6 vols.; Oxford, 1969–1980), 2.310–311; *The Chronicle of John of Worcester*, ed. and trans. Reginald R. Darlington and Patrick McGurk (3 vols.; Oxford, 1996), 3.24–25. I would like to thank John Hudson, David Bates and Stephen Marritt for their valuable comments on drafts of this paper.
 - 2 Orderic, 2.310–315. Orderic, born in the year of the revolt, was writing considerably later, but may here be drawing on the lost portion of William of Poitiers’ *Gesta Guillelmi*. William of Malmesbury believed that Ralph wanted to usurp the throne for himself; *Gesta Regum Anglorum*, ed. and trans. Roger A.B. Mynors, Rodney M. Thompson and Michael Winterbottom (2 vols., Oxford, 1998), 1.472. For Waltheof, son of Earl Siward, who held a large Midlands earldom (often but anachronistically called the earldom of Huntingdon or Northampton) and was granted Northumbria by King William in 1072, see F. Scott, “Waltheof, earl of Northumbria,” *Archaeologia Aeliana* 4th Ser. 30 (1952), 149–215; Ann Williams, *The English and the Norman Conquest* (Woodbridge, 1995), pp. 28, 57–65; Christopher P. Lewis, “Waltheof, earl of Northumbria (c. 1050–1076),” *ODNB*; and Joanna Huntingdon, “The Taming of the Laity: Writing Waltheof and Rebellion in the Twelfth Century,” *Anglo-Norman Studies* 32 (2010), 79–95.
 - 3 Its significance is reflected in 1075, rather than 1066 or 1087, being the chosen starting date for Robert Bartlett’s *England under the Norman and Angevin Kings, 1075–1225* (Oxford, 2000). For discussions of the revolt, see David C. Douglas, *William the Conqueror* (London, 1964), pp. 231–233; David Bates, *William the Conqueror* (Stroud, 1989), pp. 154–156; Williams, *The English and*

tenurial upheavals.⁴ The defection of Roger, son of one of the Conqueror's staunchest supporters William fitz Osbern, highlighted the fragility of the loyalty of the next generation of Normans to the older king; the support of a strong Breton element reflected the importation of long-standing Norman-Breton tensions into the process of the colonization of England;⁵ and the execution in 1076 of Waltheof symbolized the final failure of the Conqueror's attempts to assimilate surviving Anglo-Saxon magnates into the new regime.⁶ Here, however, we are principally concerned with two closely related features of the revolt of 1075. It was the first major rising in post-Conquest England by members of William's Franco-Norman nobility (with the exception of Count Eustace of Boulogne's attack on Dover in 1067), and it was the first time castles had been used as a mechanism for a major aristocratic rebellion in England.⁷

The significance of the castle in the successful conquest of England from 1066 was famously summed up by Orderic Vitalis: "For the fortifications called castles by the Normans (*quas castella Galli nuncupant*) were scarcely known in the English provinces, and so the English – in spite of their courage and love of

the Norman Conquest, pp. 59–65; Mark Hagger, *William, King and Conqueror* (London, 2012), pp. 106–110.

- 4 Laura Marten, "The Impact of Rebellion on Little Domesday," *Anglo-Norman Studies* 27 (2004), 132–150; Laura Marten, "The Rebellion of 1075 and its Impact in East Anglia," in C. Harper-Bill (ed.), *Medieval East Anglia* (Woodbridge, 2005), pp. 168–182.
- 5 ASC 'D', s.a. 1075, noting that Roger and Ralph "lured the Bretons to their side," and that after the rising's collapse many Bretons involved were mutilated or exiled; *The Letters of Lanfranc, Archbishop of Canterbury*, ed. and trans. Helen V. Clover and Margaret T. Gibson (Oxford, 1979), pp. 124–127. For Ralph, Williams, *The English and the Norman Conquest*, pp. 60–63; and Ann Williams, "Ralph, earl (d. 1097 x 9)," *ODNB*; for the Bretons in post-Conquest England, Katherine Keats-Rohan, "The Breton Contingent in the non-Norman Conquest," *Anglo-Norman Studies* 13 (1991), 157–172; "The Bretons and Normans of England, 1066–1154: the Family, the Fief and the Feudal Monarchy," *Nottingham Medieval Studies* 36 (1992), 42–78; and "Le rôle des Bretons dans la politique de colonisation normande d'Angleterre (1042–1135)," *Mémoires de la Société d'Histoire et d'Archéologie de Bretagne* 74 (1996), 181–215.
- 6 Orderic, 2.312–323, 344–7; John Hudson, "The Execution of Earl Waltheof and the Idea of Personal Law in England after 1066," in David Crouch and Kathleen Thompson (eds.), *Normandy and its Neighbours, 900–1250: Essays for David Bates* (Turnhout, 2011), pp. 223–235; Carl S. Watkins, "The Cult of Waltheof at Crowland," *Hagiographica* 3 (1996), 95–111; Emma Mason, "Invoking Earl Waltheof," in David Roffe (ed.), *The English and their Legacy, 900–1200. Essays in Honour of Ann Williams* (Woodbridge, 2012), pp. 185–203. The nascent cult at Crowland abbey affords an early and prominent example – two centuries before that of Simon de Montfort – of how execution might transform a defeated rebel into a venerated saint.
- 7 In 1067, Eustace had unsuccessfully attempted to seize Dover castle, but his opposition was very different in its scope and aims from the rising of 1075; see below, p. 171.