

Examiners' report

GCSE

HISTORY B

(SCHOOLS HISTORY PROJECT)

**OCR Level 1/Level 2 GCSE (9-1) in
History B (Schools History Project)**

J411

For first teaching in 2016

The Norman Conquest, 1065–1087

J411/11, J411/14 and J411/17

Summer 2025 series

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Introduction

Our examiners' reports are produced to offer constructive feedback on candidates' performance in the examinations. They provide useful guidance for future candidates.

The reports will include a general commentary on candidates' performance, identify technical aspects examined in the questions and highlight good performance and where performance could be improved. A selection of candidate responses is also provided. The reports will also explain aspects which caused difficulty and why the difficulties arose, whether through a lack of knowledge, poor examination technique, or any other identifiable and explainable reason.

Where overall performance on a question/question part was considered good, with no particular areas to highlight, these questions have not been included in the report.

A full copy of the question paper and the mark scheme can be downloaded from [Teach Cambridge](#).

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The Norman Conquest, 1065–1087 overview

The Norman Conquest, 1065–1087 is one of three British Depth Study units in the Component Group 1 British History GCSE paper. The focus of assessment for the British Depth Study is knowledge and understanding, and understanding interpretations.

To do well in the British Depth Study, candidates need to be able to identify and explain how producers of interpretations portray historical events, use second-order concepts to develop an enquiry (Question 6 (a) and 6 (b)), analyse and compare historical interpretations (Question 7) while recalling and applying their knowledge in an essay-style question from either Question 8 or Question 9.

It was clear from the majority of answers that most candidates had been well-prepared for Questions 6 and 7. On Question 6(b), most candidates could ask a historical question or identify something they would like to know. The vast majority also remained comfortable with the premise of Question 7 and were able to compare the overall impression given by the two interpretations about how William dealt with his opponents.

The essay-style questions proved more challenging for many candidates. Most candidates opted for Question 8 and this therefore generated a wide range of responses in terms of quality. Many candidates were able to deploy accurately at least some knowledge about the extent to which Harold Godwinson had the 'strongest' claim to the throne following the death of Edward the Confessor. There were fewer candidates who opted to answer Question 9, and responses to this question tended to be of a lower quality, with candidates struggling to recall precise evidence and/or apply it to the question about whether or not castles were weak or ineffective.

Candidates who did well on this paper generally:	Candidates who did less well on this paper generally:
• picked out a general feature in Interpretation A in relation to how the podcaster gave a negative impression of the role of knights in Norman culture, and then supported this with one or two points of development (Question 6(a)) • used Interpretation A to ask a wider historical question (i.e. based on a second-order concept such as causation, consequence or diversity), and gave some kind of indication of how that might help us to further understand Normandy before 1066 (Question 6(b)) • compared the overall message about how William the Conqueror dealt with his opponents, and went on to give a specific reason they differed (e.g. given the purpose of B or the nature of C) (Question 7) • effectively deployed a range of knowledge in the essay question, using precise evidence to support their answers (Questions 8 and 9), and directing this knowledge at the specific terms given in the question (e.g. 'strong claim' in Question 8 or 'weak', 'primitive' or 'ineffective' in Question 9).	• pointed out different phrases in Interpretation A instead of focusing on 'one way' the podcaster gave a negative impression of the role of knights in Norman culture; OR misunderstood the interpretation and focused on the part which referred to the sons of Anglo-Saxon noblemen. (Question 6(a)) • asked a question about the impact of Norman knights in England after 1066, which was not addressing the question; OR tried to contrive the use of particular phrases like 'diversity' or 'consequence', but did not actually ask a question which made sense; OR asked basic questions relating to accuracy/typicality (e.g. 'Were all knights like this?') (Question 6(b)) • summarised Interpretations B and C separately; OR only compared the interpretations' provenances; OR pulled out isolated phrases to compare language or tone, without getting to the heart of the content of the interpretations (Question 7) • made accurate but generalised points which they were unable to support with precise evidence in the essay question; or else gave precise evidence but did not use it to address the right question (Questions 8 and 9).

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Question 6 (a)

6

- (a) In **Interpretation A**, the podcaster gives us a negative impression of the role of knights in **Norman culture**.

Identify and explain **one** way in which he does this.

[3]

The vast majority of candidates understood the interpretation and the question, and gained at least 1 mark by picking out a specific phrase used by the podcaster (usually things like, *He describes the culture of knights as 'brutish and barbaric'*; or *He says they only knew how to do two things – 'hunt and fight'*, etc.). Most candidates were able to gain a second mark by explaining how that quotation gave us a negative impression of the role of knights in Norman culture (e.g. *This makes them seem uncivilised*). However, where candidates started with a very specific quotation in this way, they sometimes struggled to make two points of development for a third mark.

Nevertheless, there were many answers that gained 3 marks. The most successful answers were the ones which began with a more general point (e.g. *The podcaster does this by drawing a comparison between culture in Normandy and Anglo-Saxon England*). They could then give an example of this in action for a second mark (e.g. *He calls the sons of Anglo-Saxon noblemen 'educated and literate', while the Norman knights are 'brutish and barbaric'*) and go on to say how this resulted in a negative impression of the role of Norman knights (e.g. *This makes it seem as if Norman culture is inferior to Anglo-Saxon culture*).

It was good to see that there were very few answers which ignored the interpretation and the question, and drifted off into recounting knowledge about Norman knights. However, there was a small minority of candidates who misunderstood the interpretation and picked out the parts which related to Anglo-Saxon culture and education. There were also quite a lot of responses which simply listed lots of different quotations from the interpretation (rather than focusing on 'one way' as the question asks) and were unable to move past 1 mark.

Question 6 (b)

- (b) If you were asked to do further research on **one** aspect of Interpretation A, what would you choose to investigate?

Explain how this would help us to analyse and understand Normandy before 1066.

[5]

The idea of this question is to test candidates' ability to come up with a genuine historical enquiry, using the interpretation as a starting point.

It was pleasing to see that the majority of candidates were able to ask a question or indicate something that they wanted to find out. At Level 1, these were typically things such as finding out more information, usually about how knights were trained or how long it took to become a knight in Normandy. There were also a number of answers that just asked about the accuracy of the interpretation.

Better answers, rewarded at Level 2, framed a wider historical enquiry around a second-order concept, usually causation. These tended to be things such as, 'Why was there such a violent culture in Normandy?' or 'Why was there such a lack of emphasis on academic education in Norman society?' A number of candidates asked about the impact of such a violent culture on the rest of Norman society (consequence) while others framed an enquiry around the comparison of different groups, e.g. comparing the values or warrior culture of Normandy to Anglo-Saxon England (diversity). A minority of candidates were able to go on to explain how this might help us to analyse and understand Normandy before 1066 (Level 3).

However, some candidates did not achieve any marks on this question. Some asked a question which was not about Normandy before 1066 (for example, many asked about education in Anglo-Saxon England, or about the impact of knights in England after 1066). Others didn't actually ask a question or identify something they wanted to know. These answers tended simply to point to isolated phrases within the text (e.g. *I would investigate the violence*) without identifying something they wanted to find out. These kinds of responses sometimes went on to recite information they already knew about Norman knights, which was not rewardable in the mark scheme as this was not what the question was asking them.

It continues to be the case that many candidates are told they have to use certain words such as 'significance' or 'diversity'. This approach is often counter-productive. Frequently, candidates' attempts to place these words within their response betrayed a lack of understanding and came across as muddled or contrived.

Exemplar 1

	b	§ Interpretation § A highlight how knights were "at the centre of Norman culture society". and mainly focused This would imply that knighthood was a huge part of Norman culture at that time. I would
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6	b	choose to investigate how whether a knighthood was the most central feature of norman society and whether or not it resulted in many normans choosing to become knighthood a knight. This would help a historian to understand whether knighthood was considered a great honour in Normandy before 1066, or whether not other roles such as agricult- -ural or religious were also high celebrated.
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This is a good example of a wider, historical question about Normandy before 1066 based on the interpretation. The candidate has identified a valid line of enquiry based on significance ('whether knighthood was the most central feature of Norman society'). They then go on to give a logical explanation of how that might lead to better understanding of Normandy before 1066, i.e. we could see how far knights were respected and celebrated in comparison to other roles such as religious ones.

Assessment for learning



Candidates should make sure that they do ask a question or identify something they would like to know, rather than just lifting isolated phrases from an interpretation. They also need to make sure that their line of enquiry is linked to the issue in the question. Finally, although it is expected that candidates will be familiar with the concept of historical enquiry, there is no requirement that they use particular words or phrases and sometimes it is counter-productive to instruct them to do so.

Question 7

7 Interpretations B and C both focus on how William the Conqueror dealt with his opponents.

How far do they differ and what might explain any differences?

[12]

Candidates continue to perform well on this question, which offers the opportunity to show that they can identify the different ways that historical events, periods or figures are presented, and explain why they may differ.

The interpretations in this question were accessible to the vast majority of candidates, most of whom were able to explain the different overall impressions given about how William the Conqueror dealt with his opponents. They were able to show how B portrayed William as excessively harsh or vindictive when dealing with English rebels whereas C gave a more measured assessment, placing William's actions within the context of the 11th century. These responses were placed in Level 3, with many candidates gaining 8 or 9 marks for well-explained and well-supported answers.

A reasonable number of candidates were then able to explain why they differed and attained Level 4. Most did this by explaining B's desire to portray the rebels as heroes or martyrs, which meant it showed William as a monster in order to make the viewers feel sorry for the Northerners. Fewer explained that in C, Morris was writing a biography of William I, so the conclusion was taking more into account than just the Harrying of the North; rather, he was reflecting on William's treatment of his opponents across his whole life.

Some candidates advanced only to Level 2 because they stopped short of comparing the overall impression from the interpretations and instead picked out individual points/quotations to show how they were similar or different. Most frequently, this was pointing out that the interpretations both agreed that the Harrying of the North was terrible. Differences at this level included bringing together two different quotations without making an inference about the impression/portrayal of how William dealt with his opponents, e.g. *B describes William's actions as 'genocide' whereas C says it was 'standard practice in medieval warfare'*.

A minority of candidates' responses did not proceed beyond Level 1 because they either dealt with the interpretations separately, with no valid comparison, or else on compared the provenance of the interpretations rather than their content. Only a very few candidates misunderstood the question and attempted to evaluate the interpretations by explaining how reliable they were, given what they had learned (this is not what the question is asking).

Exemplar 2

7		In both interpretations, the historians do realise and admit that William the Conqueror was a cruel leader to some extent. Both describe the starving of the North as being a dire, detrimental situation for those involved, and William showing no mercy. Interpretation B describes it as 'a terrible truly terrible time', emphasising the overwhelming negativity, and even going to describe it as 'genocide'. as Interpretation C describes it similarly - 'terrible consequences'. They both use the word 'terrible', and therefore push the same view that William's actions were harsh and towards the Anglo-Saxon people. However, one main difference is the content both interpretations push. While Interpretation C does admit to William's actions being cruel, it also proposes proposes the idea that he can't be judged
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		as solely oppressive and evil - as we cannot judge his actions through the lens of the modern day. This contrasts with Interpretation B which provides zero mention of redeeming William's actions and paint him only as a cold 'military machine'. Also, the purpose of the two interpretations differ. Interpretation B is about celebrating rebels that opposed William's oppression, whereas Interpretation C is a biography detailing the good and bad of William himself. Of course It is no surprise that B portrays the people as victims and William as a whole unmerciful unmerciful tyrant where he 'burned houses' and only 'destroyed' peoples' property and lives. This is to highlight its purpose - to make the audience feel sympathy and want to celebrate the oppressed rebels. Interpretation C offers a different, view more lenient view of William because it is trying to detail his own life - and has has no doubt recounted all all the successful deeds done by William, as well as the more oppressive ones. Feeling Seeking to justify his actions by allowing the William him the thought of social norms at the time means sense in this biography, as the reader is more inclined to view William as a human man with an entire life behind him, instead of just a 'military machine'.
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This is an excellent response, which initially starts off in Level 2, as it identifies a similarity between the interpretations, i.e. that to some extent, both acknowledge William the Conqueror dealt with his opponents in a cruel manner. This is supported by detail from the interpretations.

However, the response quickly progresses into Level 3, as it moves beyond simply identifying isolated similarities. The candidate steps back to consider the overall impressions created by each interpretation regarding how William dealt with his opponents. They note that Interpretation C, while acknowledging William's cruelty, does not portray him as purely oppressive or evil. Instead, it encourages the reader to consider his actions within the context of the 11th century. The candidate compares this to Interpretation B, which presents a much harsher view of William, depicting him as a cold, ruthless 'military machine'. This comparison demonstrates a clear understanding of the differences in portrayal between the two interpretations.

The response reaches Level 4 when the candidate goes beyond summarising the content and provenance of each interpretation. They explain why Interpretation B is likely to portray William as merciless and ruthless – because it aims to evoke sympathy for the Northern rebels and highlight their suffering. Conversely, they argue that Interpretation C, being a biography, is far more likely to be more balanced because it is reflecting on William's entire life, acknowledging both his merciful and oppressive actions. This nuanced understanding and developed explanation places the response in Level 4, where it earns the maximum 12 marks.

Assessment for learning



Most candidates tend to do well on this question. Candidates who do struggle to move beyond Level 1 or Level 2 should take a moment before beginning their answer to consider, 'What impression does the author (or artist, etc.) want to give me about X?' They should then select details from the extract (or image) to support their answer.

Candidates should also be encouraged to consider *specific* reasons that a particular organisation or individual might want to give us the impression they do. Because these will be interpretation-specific, it is important that candidates are given numerous opportunities to 'bump into' historical interpretations to practise this kind of thing routinely. Generic or pre-learned answers will rarely make it to Level 4.

Question 8*

- 8* The history website 'BBC Bitesize' argues that Harold Godwinson had the 'strongest claim' to the English throne after Edward the Confessor's death in January 1066.

How far do you agree with this view?

Give reasons for your answer.

[20]

This was the more popular question and produced a wide range of responses in terms of quality.

Valid content referenced to support the interpretation included:

- Edward's (alleged) deathbed promise.
- Harold's role and status in 1066.
- Harold's support from the Witan.

Valid content referenced to challenge the interpretation included:

- Harold had no blood relationship to Edward.
- Harold rushing to have himself crowned, suggesting he knew his claim was dubious.
- The strength of William's claim, e.g. his (distant) blood relationship to Edward; Edward's (alleged) promise in 1051; Harold's sworn oath 1064/1065; the Pope's support.
- The strength of Edgar's claim, i.e. he was the closest male relation to Edward.

The strongest responses explained why these things mattered in the context of how Anglo-Saxon kings were chosen.

Several candidates attempted unsuccessfully to explain Harald Hardrada's claim to the throne but tended not to have accurate knowledge about this. They incorrectly assumed that his claim had passed to him from his father (rather than his nephew, Magnus), and were not able to explain how he had come by his claim.

At Level 2 and above, candidates included precise evidence to support their points and, crucially, explained how their evidence related to the question of whether Harold's 'claim' was the 'strongest'. Answers which attained Level 5 put forward four explained points, with at least one point on either side of the argument.

Responses (or parts of responses) which did not move beyond Level 1 tended to be lacking in precise knowledge and were unable to develop their answers beyond relatively simple statements. There were also a number of weaker answers which drifted away from the question of who had a 'strong claim' and instead veered into answering a slightly different question about who 'would have made a good ruler' or 'which was the best candidate'.

Exemplar 3

I would agree, that Harold Godwinson ~~was~~ had the 'strongest claim' to the throne after the ~~the~~ death of Edward the Confessor, surpassing William's claim and all others.

One way in which he had the strongest claim was by how he was promised it by Edward. Right before Edward ~~to~~ the Confessor's death, he promised Harold the throne. This shows us that the king chose Harold and believed he had the right to rule. This is important to Harold's claim as it was the most direct and recent commitment by ~~Edward~~ before his death in choosing a successor before his death. This along with how English ~~society~~ Saxon society would have believed in Edward's decision as ^{he was a} good and pious ruler would have been strong evidence for his succession.

However, It is possible that William was already promised the ~~the~~ throne by Edward. ~~and~~ William's claim depends mainly on how he was said to have been chosen by Edward many years before in 1051.

As well as this, despite being disputed, it is said ~~that~~ that Harold Godwinson pledged an ~~oat~~ oath of loyalty to William in 1064 in Normandy, an oath sworn over holy relics. This is significant, as it meant both that Edward initially intended William to rule and that Harold ~~resigned~~ accepted William's succession, thus invalidating his own. Therefore some historians believe that William actually had a stronger claim.

Another reason for Harold having the 'strongest' claim is his existing position in Saxon society. Harold Godwinson was the Earl of Wessex ~~one of~~ the strongest shire, before 1066, already advising the king and being ~~being~~ a figure of power. Along with this ~~he was~~ he had a greater understanding of Saxon culture and ways of life, ~~something that caused difficulty~~ William's lack of understanding when he came to power. Furthermore, he was accepted by the Witan, the king's advisors, leading him to be crowned on the 6th of January. I believe that Harold being already heavily connected to Saxon society is a big reason for his claim.

Finally, the lack of a strong ~~swear~~ heir by bloodline is another reason for Harold having the strongest claim. Edgar Atheling was the closest living relative of Edward after his death. Due to Edgar's young age, he backed down, not being accepted by the Witan and endorsing Harold instead. This is significant as Harold had then been twice accepted by people of royal bloodline, ~~like~~ whereas William only had very distant connection through his aunt.

To conclude, I strongly believe that Harold Godwinson had the 'strongest claim' due to his strong connection to the throne and his ~~because~~ ^{existing influence} proven competence, ~~due to~~ ^{receiving} the most powerful shire (Wessex) ^{is} and his understanding of Saxon Culture. I believe that William's claim is invalidated due to confusion of events and his promise having been 15 years earlier than Harold's.

This is a strong response which makes four developed points and was awarded 19 marks.

In the first paragraph, the candidate makes effective use of the deathbed promise to strengthen Harold Godwinson's claim to the throne. This use of specific detail places the response securely in Level 2.

The second paragraph provides a high-quality explanation of William's claim, supported by relevant evidence. This includes the argument that Edward had promised the throne to William as early as 1051, as well as the claim that Harold swore an oath of loyalty to William in 1064 while in Normandy, an oath sworn on holy relics. The candidate explains why this swearing of an oath was significant and how it bolstered William's claim.

The third paragraph explores how Harold Godwinson's claim is further strengthened by referring to his position within Anglo-Saxon England. The candidate offers specific supporting detail: they correctly identify Harold as the Earl of Wessex, mention his advisory role to Edward before his death, and note that he was supported by the Witan.

Finally, the candidate presents a less common, yet valid argument – that Harold had the strongest claim because there was no immediate blood relative available to take the throne. Although Edgar Atheling was technically a claimant, the candidate notes that he did not pursue his claim.

The response ends with a conclusion. However, it lacks clarity and is somewhat muddled. It doesn't quite serve as a clinching argument, as it is more of a summary of previous points.

Question 9*

9* In describing early Norman castles as 'rather weak and primitive', the website 'www.worldhistory.biz' suggests that they were **not very effective**.

How far do you agree with this view of Norman castles in England between 1066 and 1087?

Give reasons for your answer.

[20]

This was the less popular of the two essay questions and, on the whole, tended to be answered by less successful candidates. Candidates who did well on this question drew on content such as:

To agree:

- Countryside castles after 1071 were weaker (e.g. Castle Acre).
- Some castles (e.g. York) were destroyed in rebellions and therefore weak.
- Some castles were rather simple (or 'primitive') in design, e.g. ringworks, or built into older Roman/Iron Age forts.

To disagree:

- Evidence that castles were not weak but in fact highly fortified, supported by details of the features of a motte and bailey castle – motte, watchtower, ramparts/earth banks, ditches, palisades, etc.
- The use of various case studies – Goltho, Hen Domen, etc. – to demonstrate these features.
- Castles were effective as they played a vital military role in the conquest, being used as weapons to subdue rebellions (e.g. they housed garrisons, etc.).
- The effectiveness of castles as status symbols (e.g. Castle Acre) – they were perhaps weak but still effective as tools of psychological intimidation (e.g. Saxons were forced to build them; castles were built on top of Saxon houses, etc.).
- A small number were built in stone – e.g. features of Tower of London – and therefore not weak.

However, there were many answers which did not progress beyond Level 1 on this question and this tended to be for one of two reasons. Firstly, and overwhelmingly, candidates did not have the knowledge required and fell back onto very generic and simplistic statements which lacked specific detail (e.g. 'they were made of wood so could be burned down'). Secondly, some candidates were clearly answering a different question about the purpose of castles and whether they were built for military reasons or as status symbols. So while the content they recalled was quite often relevant, many candidates did not pick up credit for it because they were not directing it at the precise question which had been asked about whether or not castles were 'weak' and 'ineffective'.

Exemplar 4

9	I partially agree ^{with this view,} that Norman castles the majority of Norman castles were rather weak and were ineffective as castles however, castles built were before 1071 were strong, as defensive structures and were not weak. Between 1066 and 1071 castles were built as military fortresses to suppress the rebellious Saxons. Around 35 castles were built during this time period. They were often built in towns where revolts had taken place like York and Exeter. Many Some castles were also built on the road network like at Warwick and Nottingham to control this important route. Therefore, these military fortresses were not weak and primitive and were effective in controlling rebellions and transport routes. Castles were also built to control river crossings during this time period. A good example of this is Her Dover which had a large tower to watch the river crossing and see who went where. It also had deep ditches and double ramparts which proved it was a strong defensive structure. Therefore, castles built in the period of 1066 to 1071 were not weak
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		weak and were effective at controlling transport and the Anglo-Saxons.
		However, from 1071 1071 to 1087 1087 the purpose of castles changed. They were no longer military fortresses to suppress the Saxons, they were now built as status symbols for the Norman lords. 500 castles were built and 80% of castles were built in the countryside. Norman lords often built castles in the middle of their estates to control their land and collect taxes more effectively. Therefore, the majority of Norman castles were weak and somewhat not ineffective when built as status symbols.
		An example of a castle that was built to express the power and status of a Norman lord is Castle Acre. This was a two-storey house built inside a ringwork. It had very weak defences and would have been easy to attack however, the Anglo-Saxon rebellions had stopped by then and the castle was built as a status symbol. Therefore, castles built between 1071 and 1087 were status symbols to show off the power of the owner and we were weak and primitive.

This is a good response to Question 9 which was placed in Level 4 and awarded 15 marks.

The response begins with a description of castle building between 1066 and 1071 which was placed within Level 1.

Towards the end of this initial paragraph, the candidate moves into Level 2 by using this knowledge to engage more directly with the question. They argue that castles were effective in dealing with rebellions due to their strategic placement – particularly their control of roads and key routes to the North, where rebellions had occurred. This is a valid point that links knowledge to the question's focus.

In the second paragraph, the candidate includes a detailed account of Hen Domen on the Welsh border (Level 1). The response progresses to Level 3 when the candidate links this detail to the question. They argue that Hen Domen was a strong defensive structure, using this to support the idea that castles were not weak.

The third paragraph, however, does not move the response further up the mark scheme. While it includes specific detail about castles after 1071 (Level 1), the candidate fails to use this information in a valid way. In fact, their argument is slightly illogical – the candidate claims castles were used to control land and collect taxes but then concludes they were weak and ineffective. This undermines their argument and lacks clarity.

The final paragraph is stronger. The candidate provides a description of Castle Acre, highlighting how its design and limited defences suggest that it was not particularly strong. Crucially, this time, they then use this to address the question. This takes the response into Level 4.

Assessment for learning



To be successful in Questions 8 and 9, candidates need to be able to show they have precise knowledge about the topic given. Without being able to draw on any specific evidence, candidates are unlikely to be able to advance their answers beyond Level 1. They also need to make sure that they are using that knowledge in a valid way to answer the question which has been set. Sometimes (as with Question 9), it was clear that candidates were repeating an answer to a previous question they may have practised in class. However, for Level 2 and above, it is vital that they remain focused on the precise terms of the question in front of them.

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