Celebrating Historical Events:
1066, The Battle of Hastings

According to some English medievalists, the year 1066 is one date that every English schoolchild knows by heart. That may be the case; however, in my teaching career, I’ve discovered that every American schoolchild does not know 1066 by heart nor what famous battle was fought in that year (I don’t mean to imply that the Battle of Hastings was the most significant event of 1066 world-wide; it’s just that that date is the focus of this activity). In order to fix mentally a chronological milepost, I have developed activities which allow students to "celebrate" those events and put these dates and events associated with them into their long-term memories. One example of my "celebration" approach is the activities related to our study of 1066, the Battle of Hastings.

Primary Learning Outcomes

The following focus questions are the primary learning outcomes for this activity:

1. What was the Battle of Hastings and what were its consequences?
2. How are primary sources used in the study of history?
3. Why did the Normans invade England in October of 1066?
4. Who was the legitimate heir to the throne of England in 1066?
5. How did the battles of Gate Fulford (September 20, 1066) and Stamford Bridge (September 25, 1066) affect the outcome of the Battle of Hastings?
6. What were the similarities and differences of the tactical and strategic planning of Duke William of Normandy and King Harold of England?
7. How did the Norman Conquest of England affect changes in language, art, architecture, and government?

Procedures/Activities

If appropriate for your class and schedule: By mid-September, the teacher should divide the class into Normans and Anglo-Saxons and mark the date October 14th on the calendar. Students should be assigned research using the internet (see websites below) as well as print sources. Students should read general accounts of the battle and its aftermath, as well as publications devoted to some of the key players in the battle: William the Conqueror, King Harold of England, King Edward the Confessor, Bishop Odo of Bayeux, King Harald Hardrada of Norway, among others. Research on the battle and its participants can be assigned as homework.
Students should be assigned research topics on various aspects of Anglo-Saxon and Norman civilizations. Topics might include the following:

1. The Duchy of Normandy before 1066
2. Anglo-Saxon England before 1066
3. feudalism
4. The role of the medieval church
5. William the Conqueror
6. Harold Godwinson
7. Edward the Confessor
8. Harald Hardrada
9. Bishop Odo of Bayeux
10. The Bayeux Tapestry
11. Anglo-Saxon Art
12. Anglo-Saxon kingship
13. The origins of the duchy of Normandy
14. The impact of the Norman Conquest
15. The Battle of Hastings
16. Norman tactics and strategy
17. Anglo-Saxon tactics and strategy
18. The Battle of Gate Fulford
19. The Battle of Stamford Bridge
20. The Godwinson Family

Student papers on the above topics should be relatively short research reports. I typically give students a week to complete the reports. Upon completion, the reports are turned in to the teacher and evaluated. Once the teacher evaluates the papers, students are asked to share their research findings in class and the class engages in appropriate discussions of the topics.

After students are designated as either Anglo-Saxons or Normans, they should then begin preparing armor and weapons to wear/use for the celebration of the Battle of Hastings on or near October 14th. Suggest to the students that they should construct chain-mail like-armor using burlap bags, pillow cases, cardboard, or some other material. For weapons such as swords, shields, bows, and arrows, students can use wood, plastic, or some other material. Students might wish to go to any number of websites (see website list below) on the Bayeux Tapestry for an eleventh-century view of arms and armor. This part of the assignment should be done as a combination of homework and class work. Armor and weapons should be completed by the 14th of October (or the school day nearest the 14th).

A week or so leading up to the 14th of October, ask the principal to make short announcements that the big day is rapidly approaching. This gives added credibility to the importance of the event. Once the big day arrives, it’s time to go outside to an athletic field or other spacious area on campus to recreate the famous battle. A few preliminaries are essential: Prior to October 14th, the teacher should prepare and deliver a lecture complete with map and troop deployment and movements, showing the phases of the battle. Go over the movements of the battle with the students so that they will have a relatively clear idea of what to do once they’re outside re-enacting the battle.
On October 14th, students should have their makeshift armor and weapons at school. The teacher should then take students out to the athletic field or other spacious area on campus and begin the battle re-enactment. The Anglo-Saxons should be arranged in their defensive position, preferably on an elevated area to simulate the hill on which the Anglo-Saxon army defended its position against the Normans in the valley below them. Then, arrange the Normans into their positions. By this time, the students should know how both armies were deployed.

The action begins when Norman archers pretend to fire volleys against the Anglo-Saxon position. Next, the Norman infantry advances against the Anglo-Saxon army. As the two armies converge, the teacher should blow a whistle to stop the action. Using a pair of dice, one to a Norman and one to a Saxon, the two opponents roll and the higher number decides the combat resolution. The warrior with the lower roll is out of the action. Repeat this several times, depending on the time allotted for the battle re-enactment.

If possible, have someone videotape the re-enactment. After returning to the classroom, or on a subsequent day, have the class view the videotape. On the day the tape is shown, have students bring snacks for viewing the video and for celebrating the anniversary: This year will be the 938th anniversary of the great battle). The teacher can provide some of the snacks and students can be asked to bring individual items. The snacks should be named after important figures in the battle: Battle of Hastings Cake; William the Conqueror Punch; Edward the Confessor Cookies; Bayeux Tapestry Bridge Mix, etc.

As a culminating activity, students should be assigned a two to three page essay describing the phases of the Battle of Hastings, the critical points of the battle, the tactics and strategy of Duke William and King Harold, and other elements on which they might focus. Students should demonstrate in their essays an understanding of the Battle of Hastings and its aftermath. Teachers might also consider: 1) content and organization; 2) style; 3) conventions of written language; 4) sentence formation/clarity; and, 5) spelling and grammar. The essay can also be evaluated using the holistic rubric listed below. Participation in the re-enactment can also be assessed. Students’ weapons, costumes, etc. can be evaluated as a project grade: The aesthetics of and time spent on the project.

Conclusion

Students who already understand the concepts of this lesson will serve as resources for the students who have not learned the concepts and the content. As the course progresses chronologically beyond the Battle of Hastings and the Norman Conquest of England, 1066 becomes a historical milestone for students. Students use both primary and secondary sources to discover what the major impact of the Battle of Hastings and the subsequent Norman Conquest of England was: From the introduction of a continental type of feudalism and a foreign aristocracy to the legal, literary, architectural, economic, and artistic changes.

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BATTLE OF HASTINGS: SELECT BIBLIOGRAPHY

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• Carter, J.M., The Norman Conquest in English Historiography.
• Contamine, P., Warfare in the Middle Ages.
• Hollister, C.W., Anglo-Saxon Military Institutions: On the Eve of the Norman Conquest.
• Howarth, D., 1066: The Year of the Conquest.
• Morillo, S., Warfare Under the Anglo-Norman Kings, 1066-1135.
• Oman, C.W.C., A History of the Art of War in the Middle Ages.
• Stenton, F.M., Anglo-Saxon England.
• Wilson, D., The Bayeux Tapestry.

Useful Websites

1. Title: The Battle of Hastings, 1066
   URL: http://www.battle1066.com
   Annotation: Netscape describes this site as "a richly illustrated and highly detailed site devoted to the Norman invasion of Britain, and especially the Battle of Hastings."

2. Title: 1066 Country
   URL: http://www.1066country.com
   Annotation: A tour of places surrounding the Battle of Hastings; museums and galaries are featured; travel tips.

3. Title: The Battle of Hastings and the Norman Conquest
   URL: http://www.members.tripod.com/~GeoffBoxell/1066.htm
   Annotation: This is a very interesting site on the events leading up to and including the Battle of Hastings. The site also focuses on the impact of the Norman Conquest on England and Europe. Also, there is a substantial amount of material on Anglo-Saxon England before the Norman Conquest. There are also links to other related sites.

4. Title: De Re Militari
   URL: http://www.deremilitari.org
   Annotation: Essential for the study of medieval military history.

5. Title: The Battle of Hastings
   URL: http://www.insurenet.co.uk/users/1066ad (BROKEN LINK)
   Annotation: This site includes a useful overview of the Battle of Hastings and its significance. However, the most interesting facets of the site are the photographs of re-enactors dressed in period armor and weapons and re-enacting the battle.

6. Title: Level 1 Writing Tasks—Holistic Rubric
   URL: http://www.fcps.edu/DIS/0HSICS/forlang/PALS/rubrics/1wrt_hol.htm (BROKEN LINK)
   Annotation: This is a suggested holistic rubric for evaluating student essays.