

WAS IT WILLIAM OR GUILLAUME?

THE LANGUAGE OF THE NORMAN
CONQUEST AND BEYOND



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Statue of Guillaume le Conquérant in his hometown of Falaise, Normandy
Source: [Wikimedia Commons](#)

The answer to our title question is not straightforward. For most speakers of French, the *Conquérant's* name is Guillaume whereas for English speakers, the *Conqueror's* given name is obviously William. Who's right then? I would say that both are right because it is a question of perspective. But that would be a simplistic answer and there is a whole complex story behind it. By looking at the linguistic history of Guillaume/William's life and endeavours, we will attempt to shed light on part of the story.

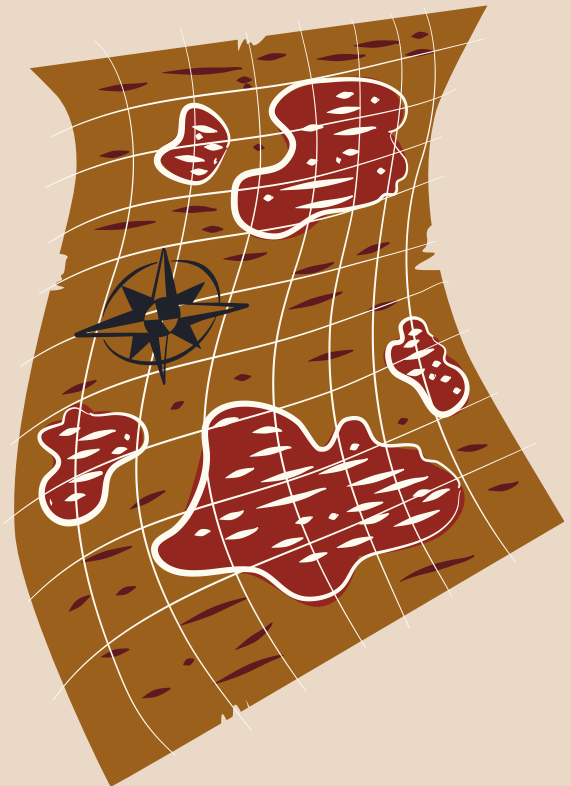
What do we mean by Guillaume/William's *real* name anyway? Is it the name on his birth certificate, the name his parents called him, the name he preferred to use or the name found in historical records? Until recently, it was common to translate the name of historical or public figures (Jeanne d'Arc/Joan of Arc, Eiríkr Rauði/Erik the Red, Fernão de Magalhães/Ferdinand Magellan, etc.). Guillaume/William lived in the 11th century, so he is no exception to this custom. That's why he's called *Guillermo* in Spanish, *Guglielmo* in Italian and *Vilhelm* in Swedish.

We also tend to apply our current way of seeing and doing things to historical events. In this sense, our first instinct would be to look at the *Conqueror's* birth certificate to find out if his birth name was indeed Guillaume or William. However, a thousand years ago, birth certificates did not exist as we know them today, and surnames were rare. It was common in many ancient civilizations to keep records of the population, but the main concern was general numbers, not names. They only started to record data related to births in Western Europe around the year 1500.

In France, Catholic parishes were required to keep a Baptism Register from 1539 on. Guillaume/William was born 500 years before this requirement, meaning that it is unlikely that there is a conventional birth certificate out there. And even if there had been some sort of certificate stating his birth, recordkeeping was not consistent a thousand years ago and not many records from the 11th century survived all the wars, revolutions, fires, and other calamities to make it to the 21st century.

Moreover, documents were written in Latin, not in the languages people actually spoke. So, relying on the *Conqueror's* birth certificate to validate his name is rather a vain endeavour. Trying to find out how his family and friends called him in daily life, or how he preferred to be called, is also far-fetched, if not mission impossible.

One of the ways to attempt to answer our question is to go back in time and recall the period when Guillaume/William was born, specifically, the linguistic reality in which he was born. One thing we can be sure of, is that he was not born in a place where contemporary French or English were spoken.



The Normans, or at least the ruling class of Normandy, including Guillaume/William's family, were descendants of Vikings who settled in the region from the end of the 8th century to the 11th century. The word Norman literally means "man of the North". Although the Normans had Scandinavian ancestry, their Norse language did not survive more than a few generations in Normandy.

They adopted the local language, which later came to be known as Norman (it wouldn't have been called "Norman" before the Normans got there). For its part, the Norse language only left a few traces in the region, namely in the toponymy (e.g., the name of the village called Cricquebœuf comes from the Norse *kirkja* + *buth* meaning *house by the church*).

The Language of Guillaume/William

As we just explained, despite Guillaume/William being of Norse descent, his family and fellow countrymen abandoned their language within a few generations after landing in Normandy. In Guillaume/William's case, it was

some six generations since his ancestors, including the ruler of Normandy Rollo/Hrólfr, had left Scandinavia. Therefore, the Normans, and even more so their descendants, many of whom were born of mixed unions, learned the language of *oïl* already spoken in the area.

We will not describe the Norman language here, but rather look at some of the features that will help us analyze the difference between the *Conqueror's* name in English and French—it has everything to do with the Norman language.

Among the differences between Norman and French, is the way many words starting with a "k" sound (written with a "c") in Norman have evolved differently in French, becoming "ch". This is why we can say that English words such as "cabbage", "cancel" "castle" and "cauldron" came from the Norman "caboche", "canceler", "castel" and "caudron" rather than from the French equivalents "chou", "chanceler", "château" and "chaudron". This feature differentiating Norman from French is attributable to a distinct evolution

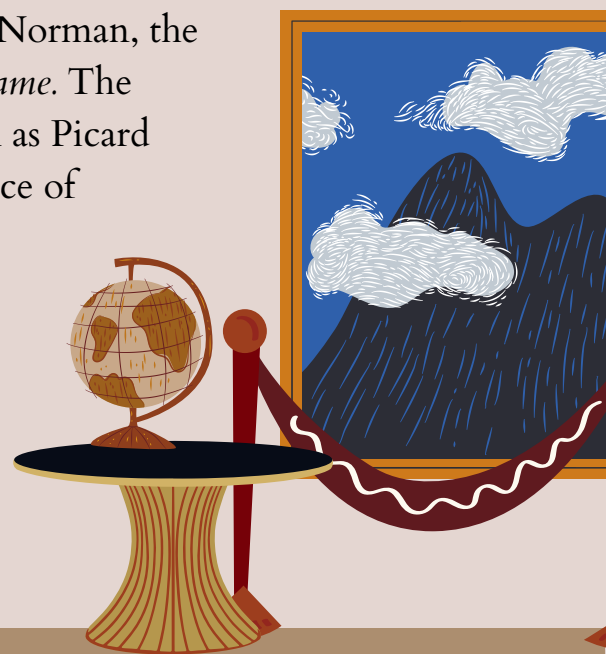
from Latin, and the similarity between Norman and English is attributable to the long-lasting Norman presence in England.

Another difference between Norman from French is the way certain words start with a “w” in Norman and “g” in French. This feature is attributable to Germanic influence on Norman. This influence is twofold: a) The Franks, a Germanic tribe, settled in various Latin-speaking areas of Europe, including Gaul in the 5th century.

These people spoke Old Frankish or Franconian, a language that left marks on the Latin that evolved into the various languages of *oïl* in what is now northern France and part of Belgium; and b) In Normandy, the presence of the Vikings, who spoke another Germanic language, Norse, reinforced the Germanic influence on the local language.

This did not happen with other languages of *oïl* such as Francien, the language that would become French. Concretely, the cognates of many French words that start with a “g” start or started back then with a “w” in Norman, and made their way into English with that “w” sound: The word “wait” comes from the Norman “wait” rather than from the French “gait” (see *guetter*) and “war” comes from the Norman “werre” rather than from the French “guerre”.

And here comes the name William/Guillaume. In Old Norman, the version starting with a “w” prevailed: *Williame* or *Willame*. The same happened in other northern languages of *oïl*, such as Picard with *Willaume* and Wallon with *Willaime*. The influence of Germanic languages is straightforward, as shown by the equivalent names in Germanic languages, such as *Willelm* in Anglo-Saxon, *Wilhelm* in German and *Willem* in Dutch. However, the “w” in some of these versions may have been pronounced “v”, as in most North Germanic or



Scandinavian Languages (Vilhiálmr in Old Norse, and Vilhelm in Danish, Norwegian and Swedish).

In the central languages of *oïl*, in the languages of *oc* (southern France) and in most other Romance languages, the “g” form dominates: *Guillaume* in French, *Guilyômo* in Franco-Provençal, *Guilhèm* in Occitan, *Guillem* in Catalan, *Guillermo* in Spanish, etc. There is a Latin version of this first name starting with a “g”, *Gulielm* (such as on the 17th century painting below), but also a version with a “w”, *Willelm*, just like in Anglo-Saxon. The latter is the one found on early Latin texts depicting William/Guillaume, including the Bayeux Tapestry.

Bayeux Tapestry

On the Bayeux Tapestry, a cloth nearly 70 metres long which tells the story of the Norman conquest of England in 1066, namely the battle of Hastings, the Latin reads *Willelm* many times, but it is spelled in different ways. Remember that Latin was a language with declension, and that the written form of *Willelm* could be the following, depending on its function in a sentence (here in the singular form):

Declension of *Willelm* in Latin

Nominative	Willelmus
Vocative	Willelme
Accusative	Willelmum
Genitive	Willelmi
Dative	Willelmo
Ablative	Willelmo



Painting of *Guelielmus Conqister* (circa 1620; unknown author)
Source: Wikimedia Commons

Even though the tapestry bears the name Bayeux and was kept for centuries at the Bayeux Cathedral in Normandy, it was most likely made in England. Moreover, it is not clear if the embroiderers, most probably Anglo-Saxon women, had any knowledge of Latin or if they were even literate. The language, the style and the spelling allude to an English influence, including in the proper names.

The different spellings of *Willelm* could therefore be attributable to both Latin declension and English influence. There are 19 occurrences of *Willelm* on the Tapestry, in the following forms: *Willelm* (10 times); *Willelmi* (5 times); *Wilgelmum* (twice), *Wilgelm* (once) and *Willelmo* (once), the latter is depicted here:



Extract from the Bayeux tapestry showing the name *Willelmo*
Source: Adapted from Wikimedia Commons

Both the linguistic history of Normandy and the written evidence show that the conqueror's name was most likely closer to *William* than to *Guillaume*. This being said, and as we have stated above, it was common to translate names in the past. Thus, it is normal that for French speakers, the *Conquérant's* name is *Guillaume*, as it is *Guilherme o conquistador* for Portuguese speakers and *Wilhelm der Eroberer* for German speakers.

Nevertheless, for the French, he can only be *Guillaume*. And it goes beyond linguistic and historical considerations: He is considered a French hero and is part of a particular French narrative of national history, of France as a rather monolithic cultural and linguistic block. Calling him *William le Conquérant* would be akin to accepting that a national hero was not exactly French, but that he came from a place that is considered a mere region of France and that his mother tongue was not French, but a mere *patois* as other languages of France are called in a somewhat

depictive manner. The same could be said about Napoleone Bonaparte, who was Corsican and only began learning French after his ninth birthday. But that's another story and the French are not the only ones to indulge in this practice.

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