

Historian reveals emotional impact of White Ship disaster near Normandy in 1120

January 29 2025



King Henry I on his throne, mourning. Table of his children and Matilda's two sons. The White Ship is depicted in a disabled condition behind. Credit: Durham University

Harriet Strahl, a Ph.D. student in the Durham University history department, has shed new light on the emotional and societal repercussions of the 1120 White Ship disaster in an article [published](#) in the *Journal of Medieval History*.

Through her detailed analysis of contemporary accounts, including the extensive writings of the monk Orderic Vitalis, Harriet uncovers how this maritime tragedy reverberated through 12th-century Anglo-Norman society.

Her research reveals not just the historical facts of the shipwreck but also its profound emotional and commemorative significance.

Harriet's findings center on the events of 25 November 1120, when the White Ship struck a rock near Barfleur, Normandy, drowning nearly all aboard, including King Henry I's heir, William Adelin, as well as many young nobles, knights, and sailors, altogether around 300 people.

Drawing on Orderic Vitalis' Ecclesiastical History, Harriet highlights how this loss devastated the English royal family and destabilized the succession.

Harriet notes that Orderic's harrowing and detailed narrative—unique among eight contemporary accounts—reflected a blend of grief, moral reflection, and monastic duty.

Commemoration and community memory

Harriet's research emphasizes the commemorative practices surrounding the disaster.

Orderic, a monk at the Norman abbey of Saint-Évroult, recorded not only the names of high-ranking victims but also those with connections to his abbey, ensuring their memory endured in prayers and liturgical practices. He also singled out and praised these victims in the narrative.

Harriet argues that this local focus illustrates the monk's commitment to his faith and his community.

Her study reveals how memory and emotion shaped medieval historical writing, with Orderic framing the shipwreck as both a national catastrophe and a personal act of commemoration.

Through her research, Harriet deepens our understanding of medieval emotions, remembrance, and the responsibilities of historical chroniclers.

Her work offers a compelling view of how a single tragic event impacted not only the royal court but also monastic communities and broader society in 12th-century England and Normandy.

More information: Harriet Claire Strahl, 'Compassion Alone Moved Me to Tell This Story': Orderic Vitalis on the Wreck of the White Ship, *Journal of Medieval History* (2024). [DOI: 10.1080/03044181.2024.2436042](https://doi.org/10.1080/03044181.2024.2436042)

Provided by Durham University

Citation: Historian reveals emotional impact of White Ship disaster near Normandy in 1120 (2025, January 29) retrieved 30 January 2025 from <https://phys.org/news/2025-01-historian-reveals-emotional-impact-white.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.