*Jan 2010 Q (b)* – “Use your own knowledge to assess how far the Sources support the interpretation that the problems arising from the linking of Normandy and England were caused **mainly** by members of William I’s own family.”

All of the sources suggest that the problems arising from the linking of Normandy and England were caused at least in part by members of William’s own family, notably his son Robert who is portrayed in sources A, C and D as a troublemaker. While sources B and D seem to give considerable prominence to the problems posed by members of William’s family, with only slight references to other issues, sources A and C suggest that such family causes were only part of the problem.

Source A, written some fifty years after the events it is describing, recounts William I’s 1076 campaign in Brittany, and focuses on both the Breton defence of their castle as well as Malcolm of Scotland’s invasion of Northumbria during William’s absence. Source C, by the generally well-regarded William of Malmesbury, has a more Norman focus and looks at the early rule of William’s son Rufus, but like Source A it identifies one of the problems of linking both countries as being the willingness of the French king to engage the English kings in battle on his side of the channel. In A, William I made peace with the French king after being defeated in battle, while Rufus doesn’t make it as far as a battle, using money to buy off the king instead. Both sources certainly agree that the French king’s influence was a problem for the kings of England in their joint rule. However, while William I was seeking to rule both England and Normandy as a single monarch, Rufus’ venture into Normandy in 1088 is explained by Source C as part of a long civil war between the sons of the Conqueror. Where Source A, by a chronicler based in East Anglia, considers the problems posed by an absentee king for England, which suffers some invasion, Source B’s only reference to English problems is to note the conflict of loyalties experienced by nobles on both sides of the channel. This could be, of course, due to Malmesbury’s Anglo-Norman parentage, giving him a broader focus than the relatively Anglo-centric Henry of Huntingdon.

Sources A and C agree that family members exacerbated the problems of ruling a linked kingdom, but Source B, by Orderic Vitalis, has a much stronger focus on the impact of members of William I’s family, to the detriment of the English. Orderic describes the regencies of William’s half-brother Odo, and his almost-family friend fitz Osbern as being grasping, harsh rules. It could be argued that Orderic shares an English focus with Source A’s Henry of Huntingdon – they are writing at roughly the same time and both have a pro-English bias – but his analysis of the problems of linked rule is clearly different. Where A’s Henry identifies the problem of an absentee king as being the danger of invasion (from Scotland in this instance), Orderic in B considers it to be the role of the regents left in charge. A’s focus does not therefore place any further blame on family members (other than to note Robert’s troublemaking role for his father), but since one of the regents in Orderic’s source is William’s half brother Odo, and the other was brought up from childhood with William, the interpretation that problems of linking the two kingdoms came from the family are much more apparent in Source B. Orderic, of course, was always willing to have a go at what he saw as Norman abuses in England, even though at other times he was positive in his accounts of the Conqueror personally, and there may be an element of over-flavouring his account to draw sympathy for those he saw as his countrymen.

The only modern source in the collection, Source D, shares with Source B an emphasis on difficulties posed by family members (in this case the feud between Rufus and Robert), but it also echoes another problem noted by Source C, which is the conflict of loyalties faced by nobles on both sides of the channel. Much of Source D, from a modern biography of Rufus, is the reported speech of Rufus himself in which he is justifying invading Normandy, and so of course it would have been in Rufus’ interests to exaggerate the problems posed by his brother Robert in order to gain baronial support. The author of D, Emma Mason, has almost certainly used early reports of what William said to reconstruct her comments, and they certainly seem to be born out by William of Malmesbury’s account, in Source C, of the enmity between the two brothers and the need on the part of nobles to decide who to follow. Both C and D, but C especially, suggests indeed that the fickle support of the barons was a key problem of ruling the linked kingdoms, although C does also allow that the very fact of serving two masters during the reign of Rufus encouraged them to negotiate a peace.

All of the sources, therefore, agree to some extent with the interpretation that the problems arising from the linking of Normandy and England were caused in part by members of William’s own family, with the anglo-centric Source B, William of Malmesbury’s more measured account in Source C and the modern source D all placing an emphasis on such problems. C and D place much of the blame on the quarrel between Robert and William Rufus, with Source A agreeing that even in his father’s reign Robert was a troublemaker. Only B, with its concern for the suffering of Englishmen in England, ignores Robert, but highlights Odo instead as a grasping regent. These common points of reference come from sources with different aims. Malmesbury in C appears to be trying to present a relatively impartial account of the troubles in Normandy, and while he describes both Rufus and Robert in unflattering terms he doesn’t apportion blame. Emma Mason in D is indirectly reporting Rufus’ own views about his brother as part of her biography of Rufus, and in so doing underlines the de-stabilising hostility between the two. Henry of Huntingdon (Source A), looking at the events in England caused by the Conqueror’s absence, still finds room to quote the father’s curse of his son Robert. Only Source B, dealing with Odo and fitz Osbern, might be considered to err on the side of partisanship in its description, and of course it only shows part of the picture of William’s regencies as later in his reign the king appointed the more even-handed Lanfranc to be regent.

For all that the sources show other factors causing problems (the French king in A and C, the nobles’ split loyalties in C and D) there is a remarkable consistency about the fact that they all do highlight family problems of one type or another, and thus allows for the conclusion that they do indeed support the interpretation that problems arising from linking the two kingdoms were caused mainly by members of William’s own family.