

THE BAYEUX TAPESTRY

With needle, thread, and Latin the Bayeux Tapestry tells the story of the Norman Conquest of England in 1066. Stretching for 230 feet, it consists of a linen background stitched with eight colors of wool yarn, an artistic *tour de force*. A running commentary describes scene after scene in succinct, simple language. In cartoon format, with a very serious purpose, the Tapestry depicts over 600 people, 190 horses and mules, 35 dogs, 500 other animals, and more than 100 trees, buildings, and ships. It is a valuable document for the study of medieval weapons, warfare, architecture, costumes, folklore, and attitudes. For the Latinist, it is a 230-foot text set in brilliant technicolor. (J. Anderson, "The Bayeux Tapestry," *The Classical Journal* 81 [1986] 253)

The three principal players in the story of the Norman Conquest of England, as told in the Bayeux Tapestry, are:

Harold, the Duke of Wessex and the most prominent military figure in England in the early 1060s CE. Harold came from an important, powerful family. As a "Englishman," he spoke Anglo-Saxon (Old English).

William, the Duke of Normandy. Normandy is in the northwestern corner of France, directly across the English Channel from England. William's ancestors were Vikings originally from Scandinavia (Northman = Norman), who before William's day had settled in Normandy. These Vikings had early on abandoned their own Scandinavian (Germanic) language and now spoke dialectally the language of the people they had displaced in France. This dialect (called Anglo-Norman), derived ultimately from Latin, is a modified form of early French. It is because of the Norman occupation of England, which followed for several centuries after William's Conquest in 1066 CE, that Anglo-Norman was able to impose an immense Latin-based vocabulary on English.

Edward, the King of England, aka "the Confessor." Edward was childless, and for some unknown reason it was popular knowledge from at least 1051 CE on that he would die that way. Thus, the matter of who would succeed him to the English throne was for a long time in question.

The history of the conquest goes back to at least 1051 CE, and even much earlier. In that year Edward the Confessor, again for reasons unknown, sided with the Normans in France against his own native Anglo-Saxons in England. He nominated as his successor William of Normandy and banished from power many Anglo-Saxons, including Harold and his father. He filled the vacated government and church positions with Normans. In the following year (1052 CE), however, Harold's father re-established himself in power and evicted Edward's Normans. For instance, he appointed the Anglo-Saxon Stigand (or Stigant) in place of the Norman Robert (or Rotbert) as Archbishop of Canterbury. The Pope did not approve of Stigand and in the next decade would give his sanction to William's invasion in order to secure the ouster of Stigand. As you will see in the Tapestry, William carries into the Battle of Hastings the *ganfanon*, the flag that symbolizes the Pope's blessing.

In 1053 CE, Harold's father died leaving his son, still a rather young man, in control of his family. For a decade or so Harold consolidated his power in England and soon began to covet Edward's throne. Though he had no legitimate right to the crown of England insofar as he did not belong to Edward's family, Harold could make some claim to royal power through his military prowess. Harold, in fact, had greater military authority in England than Edward. Thus, all Harold was really seeking was the title that went with the power.

William, on the other side of the Channel, had an equally strong—or weak, depending on which way you stack it—claim to the English throne. His family had sheltered Edward when the Dane Canute seized and controlled England the generation before (1017-1035 CE). Edward's gratitude to William's family may be the very reason for his preference of William over Harold in 1051 CE. There was yet another player on the scene: the King of Norway. He was among the heirs of Canute who had recently ruled England, and so he, too, had some argument for securing the throne. In sum, there were no fewer than three men who could with some justice say they should be King of England in 1066 CE.

On December 28, 1065 Westminster Abbey which had been many years in the building was finally consecrated. King Edward, however, was not able to attend the ceremonies because he was gravely ill. His health had, in fact, been declining in the latter half of the year. Less than a fortnight after the consecration, on January 5, 1066, Edward succumbed and was buried the next day in his new abbey.

The struggle for the throne began almost immediately. Harold, who was present at Edward's death, was the first to declare himself King and had himself crowned on the spot. But the King of Norway objected and that summer attacked the eastern coast of England. Harold defended his new realm valiantly and was victorious, smashing the Scandinavian intruders and killing their king. It was, however, an expensive and bloody victory for the Anglo-Saxons, because later that summer, dangerously near the end of the fighting season, William, who was, no doubt, aware that the English were particularly vulnerable after repulsing the Norwegians, decided to make his move and exert his claim to the English crown. He made preparations to sail across the Channel to England but had to wait in France a month and a half for favorable winds, a detail the Tapestry omits. By then it was October. William's best—in fact, only!—hope was for a quick victory.

On Saturday, October 14, 1066, he met Harold in battle at Hastings in southeastern England. At first William threw his cavalry at the English who were tightly packed in a defensive formation known as the "English shield wall." The Norman cavalry was repulsed—another detail omitted by the Tapestry—and the English in glee pursued the French as they retreated. But their pursuit proved disastrous. Harold had explicitly forbidden them to follow the Normans but, exhilarated by their initial victory, they disobeyed and when the Norman cavalry turned, they were surrounded and butchered. Rarely does an infantry fare well against men on horse.

Even though among the dead were counted Harold's younger brothers Leofwine and Gyrrh, the Angles were down but not yet out. The remaining English held their ground and, as the day and the battle wore on and no quick victory appeared, the Normans began to lose heart,

especially the younger troops whom the Tapestry calls *pueri*, “the boys.” When a rumor spread among them that William had been killed, he was compelled to ride out into battle and raise his helmet to show his face and prove he was still alive. That dangerous move restored morale, and finally near the end of the day William ordered a massive, combined assault of cavalry, infantry and archers. Under the weight of this three-fold attack the English “shield wall” buckled and the Normans breached the English camp. Harold was killed by an anonymous Norman knight. Two months later, on Christmas Day 1066, William was crowned King of England and began a reign of more than twenty years and a dynasty of more than three hundred.

The Bayeux Tapestry tells in pictures the history of this conquest. The narrative related in the Tapestry is, however, hardly an unadulterated picture of historical truth. It is, in fact, heavily biased toward the Normans who, it seems likely, commissioned it. For instance, Odo, the bishop of Bayeux and the half-brother of William, figures large in the tapestry, although his role in the actual events was, as far as we can tell, negligible. The Tapestry also conflates the events of 1066 severely, making it seem as if the invasion followed the death of Edward almost immediately, which it did not. Nearly a year passed between these events, during which Harold secured his throne and defended England from Norwegian invaders, all of which the Tapestry omits.

But perhaps the best example of the Norman slant in the Tapestry is to be found in the depiction of Harold’s oath to William. Here the holy relics of the cathedral at Bayeux, on which Harold swears his allegiance to William according to the Tapestry, play an unnecessarily central role. Whether Harold ever made such an oath—and if he did, whether he performed the ceremony at Bayeux—is debatable. The oath is first mentioned in an account written in 1071 CE (five years after the Conquest) and elsewhere is said to have taken place at Bonneville-sur-Touques, not Bayeux. Thus, the oath seems to be a later fiction invented to cement the relationship of William and Harold and brand Harold *ex post facto* as a heretic, a disloyal vassal and a treacherous guest, the thankless recipient of William’s assistance and friendship. All in all, the historicity of the Tapestry’s primary narrative is questionable at best.

As a counterbalance to the Bayeux Tapestry, there are two contemporary prose accounts of the Conquest. The first is a brief and inconsequential narrative by William of Jumièges, the *Gesta Normannorum Ducum*. The second, the *Gesta Guillelmi Ducis Normannorum et Regis Anglorum* by William of Poitiers, is longer and more valuable, including many minute details concerning the Conquest. There is preserved also a Medieval epic poem about William, the *Carmen de Hastingae Proelio*, but it is of uncertain date and dubious historical value. All these are Norman works. There is no Anglo-Saxon account of the Conquest *per se*, as one might expect; after all, one of the great rewards of winning a war is the victors’ right to write the history of the war. Losers traditionally are given little say in the official version of events. Still, Anglo-Saxon chronicles exist for the year 1066, though they are understandably vague and scant. They do not mention, for instance, Harold’s trip to France on which the Tapestry dwells at length. Finally, there is also an Anglo-Saxon biography of Edward the Confessor but it is unhistorical, a virtual hagiography (“saint’s life”) with many inaccuracies. As the historian Stenton says, no “balanced or even a dispassionate narrative” of the Conquest exists.

In spite of its biases, the Bayeux Tapestry is, in one respect, a unique and balanced document. Although it was commissioned by Normans for viewing in a Norman cathedral, there is some reason to suppose that the designer, the so-called “Master of the Bayeux Tapestry,” was an Anglo-Saxon. Proof of this can be seen in the proper use of Anglo-Saxon letters, such as the “th” in the name Gyrth (written as Ð)—the average Norman would not have recognized the existence, much less the proper use of this letter—moreover, there was an established school of tapestry-making at Canterbury (England), which is known to have ended up in the possession of Bishop Odo after the Conquest. So, did Odo bring some of his English vassals over to France from his new English fiefdom around Canterbury after 1066 and commission them to sew a document of their own conquest for display in their new master’s church, perhaps specifically for the consecration of his cathedral at Bayeux in 1077? The peculiar prominence of Odo and his vassals (Wadard, Vital) in the Tapestry argues strongly that this is, in fact, the way the Tapestry came into being.

Finally, the many secular elements found in the Tapestry, especially its focus on military exploits, have encouraged a non-religious interpretation of its narrative, despite the fact the Tapestry is first recorded among church properties and seems to have been associated with religious festivals from early on. Recently, however, scholars such as Stenton have argued for a more theological view. The Tapestry does indeed read like a Medieval mystery play. The heroes and their deeds are larger than life. Their passions and crimes are Biblical in scale. The story seems intentionally framed so that it focuses on the fulfillment of fate and the execution of God’s wrath against Harold who swore an oath on holy relics and then recanted. The central character of the Tapestry is not William but Harold—Harold is depicted at least 23 times, William closer to 15 and only twice in his triumph at Hastings—and the theme is the downfall of a noble but misguided hero (Harold) who, much like Macbeth, falls through ambition. The Tapestry is notably generous to Harold, as one might expect if it was made by English hands. He is shown as possessing great dignity and prowess but also a tragic greed for power. Compared to Harold, William looks flat. Granted he is depicted as a grand and noble king, the Conqueror comes off in the tapestry as a rather one-dimensional character, a Duncan or a Macduff, with about as much stage time.

In conclusion, the Bayeux Tapestry does not tell the story of the Conquest of England so much as the punishment of sin by God. As such, it is a tale appropriate for a church where, in fact, we know it was once housed. Scholars generally believe that at the end of the Tapestry, now missing, William was shown being—or having just been—crowned King of England. While that may be true, it is unnecessary to the narrator’s theme. Harold’s fall from power and his death at Hastings resolve this religious parable perfectly well and, just as it began, the Tapestry may have concluded with Harold, not William. Thus, very little may be lost from the end.

THE TEXT OF THE BAYEUX TAPESTRY

Edward Rex. Ubi Harold dux Anglorum et sui milites equitant ad Bosham. (A)Ecclesia. Hic Edward the king. Where Harold, duke of the Angles and his soldiers ride to Bosham. Church. Here

Harold mare navigavit, et velis vento plenis venit in terram Widonis comitis. Harold. HS Harold has sailed the sea, and with sails filled with wind has come into Count Guy's territory. Harold. Here

apprehendit Wido Haroldum, et duxit eum ad Belrem et ibi eum tenuit. Ubi Harold &(et) Wido Guy has captured Harold, and led him to Beaurain and there detained him. Where Harold and Guy

parabolant. Ubi nuntii Willelmi ducis venerunt ad Widonem. Tuold. Nuntii Willelmi. HS venit converse. Where the messengers of Duke William came to Guy. Tuold. William's messengers. Here has come

nuntius ad Wilgelmum ducem. HS Wido adduxit Haroldum ad Wilgelmum Normannorum ducem. a messenger to Duke William. Here Guy has led Harold to William, the Duke of the Normans.

HS dux Wilgelm cum Haroldo venit ad palatium suum. Ubi unus clericus et Aelfgyva . . . HS Here Duke William has come with Harold to his palace. Where some priest and Aelfgyva . . . Here

Willem dux et exercitus eius venerunt ad montem Michaelis, et hS transierunt flumen Duke William and his army have come to Mont Saint Michel, and here they have crossed the river

Cosnonis—hS Harold dux trahebat eos de aren~—et venerunt ad Dol et Conan fug~vertit. Couesnon—here Duke Harold dragged them from the sand—and came to Dol and Conan fled.

Rednes. HS milites Willelmi ducis pugnant contra Dinantes, et Cunan claves porrexit. HS Willelm Rennes. Here Duke William's soldiers fight the men of Dinan and Conon has handed over the keys. Here William

dedit Haroldo arma. HS Willelm venit Bagias. Ubi Harold sacramentum fecit Willelmo duci. HS has given Harold arms. Here William has come to Bayeux. Where Harold swore an oath to Duke William. Here

Harold dux reversus est ad Anglicam terram, et venit ad Edwardum regem. HS portatur corpus Duke Harold has returned to English territory, and has come to King Edward. Here is being carried the body

Eadwardi regis ad ecclesiam Sancti Petri Apostoli. HS Eadwardus rex in lecto alloquitur fideles, of King Edward to the church of St. Peter the Apostle. Here King Edward in bed addresses his vassals,

et hS defunctus est. HS dederunt Haroldo coronam regis. HS residet Harold rex Anglorum. and here he has died. Here they have given Harold the king's crown. Here sits Harold as King of the Angles.

Stigant archiepiscopus. Isti mirantur stellam. Harold. HS navis Anglica venit in terram Willelmi Archbishop Stigand. These men gawk at the comet. Harold. Here an English ship has come into the territory of

ducis. **H§** Willelm dux iussit naves (a)edificare. **H§** trahuntur naves ad mare. Isti portant armas
Duke William. Here Duke William has given the order to build ships. Here ships are dragged to the sea.
These men are carrying arms

ad naves et **h§** trahunt carrum cum vino et armis. **H§** Willelm dux in magno navigio mare
onto the ships and here they drag a cart with wine and arms. Here Duke William in a large ship has crossed

transivit et venit ad Pevenesae. **H§** exeunt caballi de navibus, et **h§** milites festinaverunt Hestingam
the sea and come to Pevensey. Here the horses debark from the ships, and here the soldiers have rushed to Hastings

ut cibum raperentur. **H§** est Wadard. **H§** coquitur caro et **h§** ministraverunt ministri. **H§**
to procure provisions. Here is Wadard. Here meat is cooked and here the servants have served. Here

fecerunt prandium, et **h§** episcopus cibum et potum benedicit. Odo episcopus. Willelm. Rotbert.
they have made dinner, and here the bishop blesses the food and drink. Bishop Odo. William. Robert.

Iste iussit ut foderetur castellum at Hestenga. Ceastra. **H§** nuntiatum est Willelmo de Haroldo.
That man has ordered a fort to be dug at Hastings. The camp. Here a report is made to William about Harold.

H§ domus incenditur. **H§** milites exierunt de Hesteng~, et venerunt ad pr(o)elium contra Haroldum
Here a house is being burnt. Here the soldiers have left from Hastings, and entered into battle against Harold

regem. **H§** Willelm dux interrogat Vital si vidisset exercitum Haroldi. Iste nuntiat Haroldum
the king. Here Duke William asks Vidal if he had seen Harold's army. That man tells Harold

regem de exercitu Wilelmi ducis. **H§** Willelm dux alloquitur suis militibus ut prepararent se
the king about Duke William's army. Here Duke William advises his soldiers to prepare themselves

viriliter et sapienter ad pr(o)elium contra Anglorum exercitum. **H§** ceciderunt Lewine et Gyrth
manfully and wisely for battle against the Angles' army. Here Lewine and Gyrth have fallen,

fratres Haroldi regis. **H§** ceciderunt simul Angli et Franci in pr(o)elio. **H§** Odo episcopus
King Harold's brothers. Here Angles and Franks have fallen together in battle. Here Bishop Odo

baculum tenens confortat pueros. **H§** est Wilelmus. Eustatius. **H§** Franci pugnant, et ceciderunt
holding his staff encourages the younger soldiers. Here is William. Eustatius. Here the Franks are fighting and
they have fallen

qui erant cum Haroldo. **H§** Harold rex interfectus est, et fug~verterunt Angli.
those who were with Harold. Here King Harold has been killed, and the Angles have turned in flight.