

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 81.3 (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 A.D. 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 for several centuries after William's Conquest in 1066 A.D. 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 A.D. 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 A.D., much earlier really. 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 A.D.), 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 A.D. 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 claim 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, however, also had a strong claim to the English throne. His family had sheltered Edward when the Dane Canute seized and controlled England the generation before (1017-1035 A.D.). Edward's gratitude to William's family may be the very reason for his preference of William over Harold in 1051 A.D. 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 claim to 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 A.D.

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 sailed across the Channel to England, although not immediately. He 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 (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 -- the Norman cavalry turned, then surrounded and butchered the English who were on foot. Among the dead could be counted Harold's younger brothers, Leofwine and Gyrth. The remaining English, however, held their ground. As the day and the battle wore on and on and no quick victory appeared, the Normans began to lose heart, especially the younger troops (whom the Tapestry calls the pueri). A rumor spread among them that William had been killed. In order to restore his troop's morale, William was compelled to ride out into battle and raise his helmet to show his face and prove he was still alive. 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 a 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. It did not. Nearly a year passed before William invaded, 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 A.D. (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, an unloyal vassal and a treacherous guest, the thankless recipient of William's assistance and friendship. All in all, the historicity of the tapestry's 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 you might guess; after all, one of the great rewards of winning a war is the victors' right to write the history of the war. Losers rarely have much 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 (see below, Bibliography) 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, it appears 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 a "d" with a slash through it). The average Norman would not have recognized the existence, much less the proper use of this letter. Also, there was an established school of tapestry-making at Canterbury (England), which is known to have ended up after the Conquest in the possession of Bishop Odo. 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. It is a tale appropriate for not a palace but 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 Latin Text of the Bayeux Tapestry. The captions of the Bayeux Tapestry which explicate and underline its narrative and theme are written in simple (Medieval) Latin. There are relatively few differences between this and Classical Latin. Some diphthongs, for example, are written as single vowels:

prelium = proelium

edificare = aedificare

Some words have taken on new meanings since Classical antiquity:

dux = "duke"
palatium = "palace"

comes = "count"
miles = "knight"

There are also frequent abbreviations, especially of -am or -um to -ā and -ū respectively. Apli, for instance, is short for ap(ost)li ("of the apostle").

Bibliography. The best book on the Bayeux Tapestry is F. Stenton, The Bayeux Tapestry (London 1965). E.R.D. MacLagan, The Bayeux Tapestry (London, 1943), discusses in detail the images in the border and argues forcefully that they comprise a critical commentary on the central text.

THE TEXT OF THE BAYEUX TAPESTRY

Edward Rex. Ubi Harold dux Anglorum et sui milites equitant ad Bosham.

(A)Ecclesia. Hic Harold mare navigavit, et velis vento plenīs venit in terram

Widonis comitis. Harold. Hic apprehendit Wido Haroldum, et duxit eum ad

Belrem et ibi eum tenuit. Ubi Harold (et) Wido parabolant. Ubi nuntii

Willelmi ducis venerunt ad Widonem. Tuold. Nuntii Willelmi. Hic venit

nuntius ad Wilgelmum ducem. Hic Wido adduxit Haroldum ad Wilgelmum

Normannorum ducem. Hic dux Wilgelm cum Haroldo venit ad palatium suum. Ubi

unus clericus et Aelfgyva . . . Hic Willem dux et exercitus eius venerunt ad

montem Michaelis, et hic transierunt flumen Cosnonis -- hic Harold dux

trahebat eos de arenā -- et venerunt ad Dol et Conan fugā vertit. Rednes.

Hic milites Willelmi ducis pugnant contra Dinantes, et Cunan claves porrexit.

Hic Willelm dedit Haroldo arma. Hic Willelm venit Bagias. Ubi Harold

sacramentum fecit Willelmo duci. Hic Harold dux reversus est ad Anglicam

terram, et venit ad Edwardum regem. Hic portatur corpus Eadwardi regis ad

ecclesiam Sancti Petri Apostoli. Hic Eadwardus rex in lecto alloquitur

fideles, et hic defunctus est. Hic dederunt Haroldo coronam regis. Hic

residet Harold rex Anglorum. Stigant archiepiscopus. Isti mirant stellam.

Harold. Hic navis Anglica venit in terram Willelmi ducis. Hic Willelm dux iussit naves (a)edificare. Hic trahuntur naves ad mare. Isti portant armas ad naves et hic trahunt carrum cum vino et armis. Hic Willelm dux in magno navigio mare transivit et venit ad Pevenesae. Hic exeunt caballi de navibus, et hic milites festinaverunt Hestinga ut cibum raperentur. Hic est Wadard. Hic coquitur caro et hic ministraverunt ministri. Hic fecerunt prandium, et hic episcopus cibum et potum benedicit. Odo episcopus. Willelm. Rotbert. Iste iussit ut foderetur castellum at Hestenga caastra. Hic nuntiatum est Willelmo de Haroldo. Hic domus incenditur. Hic milites exierunt de Hestenga, et venerunt ad pr(o)elium contra Haroldum regem. Hic Willelm dux interrogat Vital si vidisset exercitum Haroldi. Iste nuntiat Haroldum regem de exercitu Willelmi ducis. Hic Willelm dux alloquitur suis militibus ut prepararent se viriliter et sapienter ad pr(o)elium contra Anglorum exercitum. Hic ceciderunt Lewine et Gyrth fratres Haroldi regis. Hic ceciderunt simul Angli et Franci in pr(o)elio. Hic Odo episcopus baculum tenens confortat pueros. Hic est Wilelmus. Eustatius. Hic Franci pugnant, et ceciderunt qui erant cum Haroldo. Hic Harold rex interfectus est, et fugā verterunt Angli.

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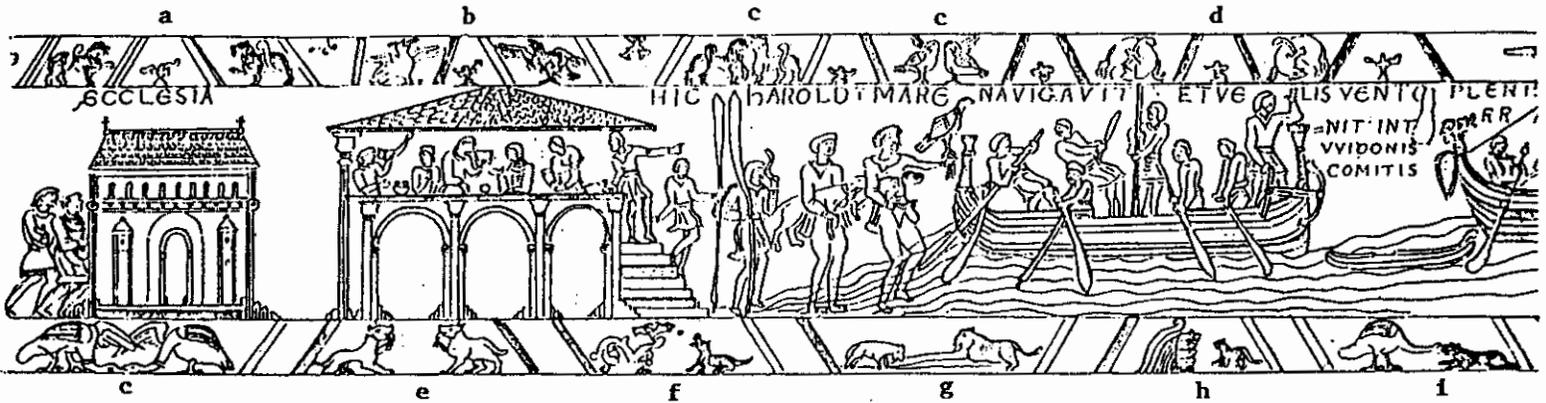
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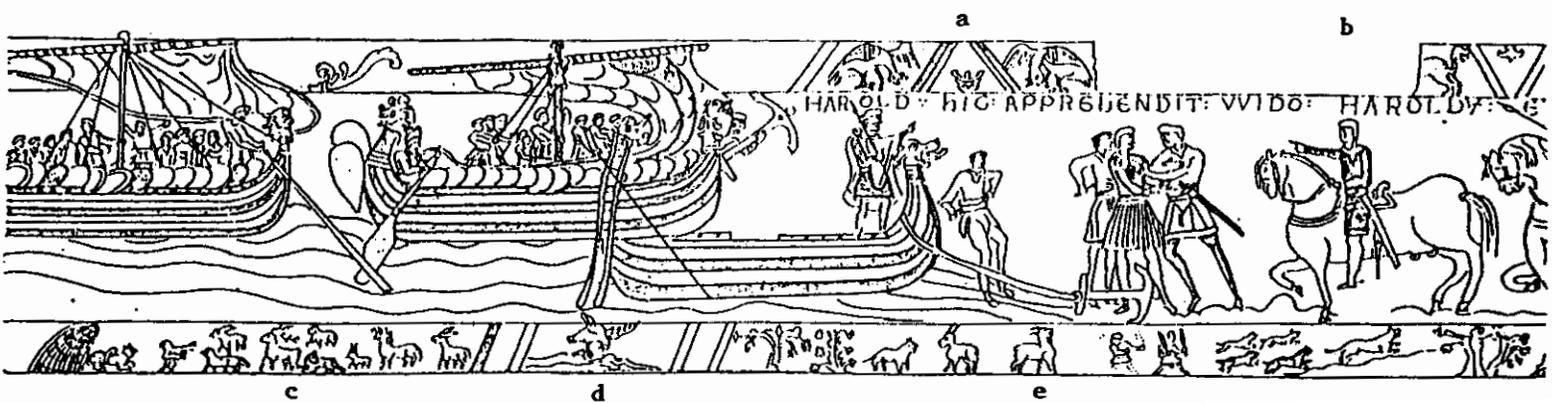
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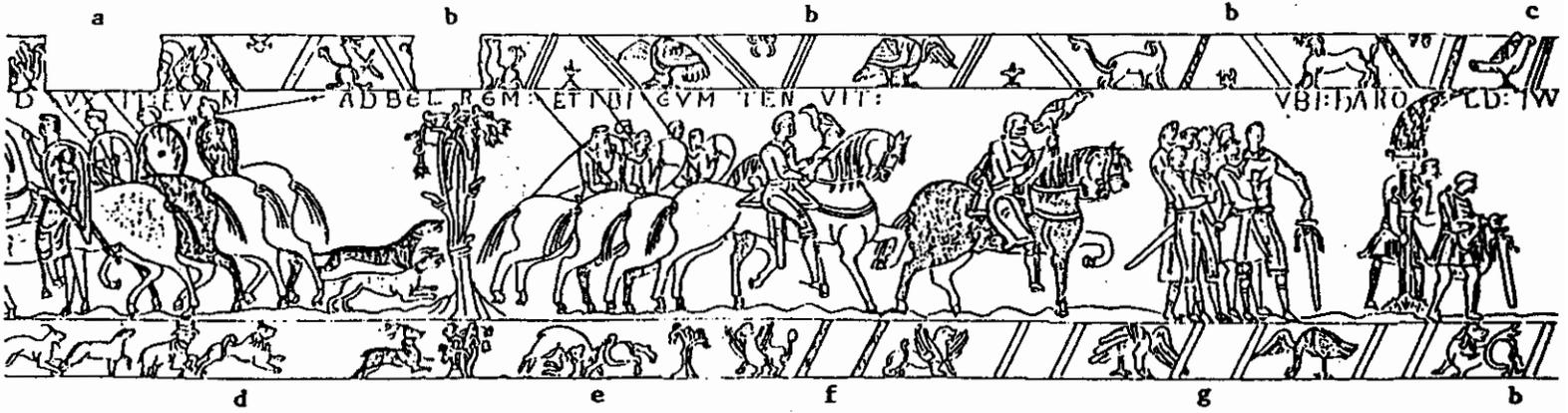
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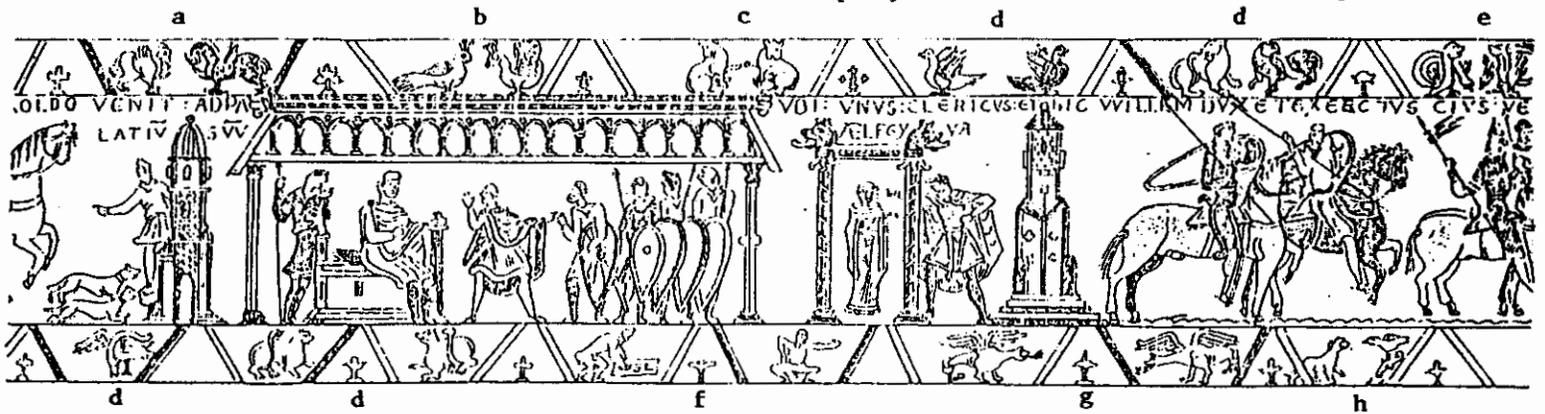
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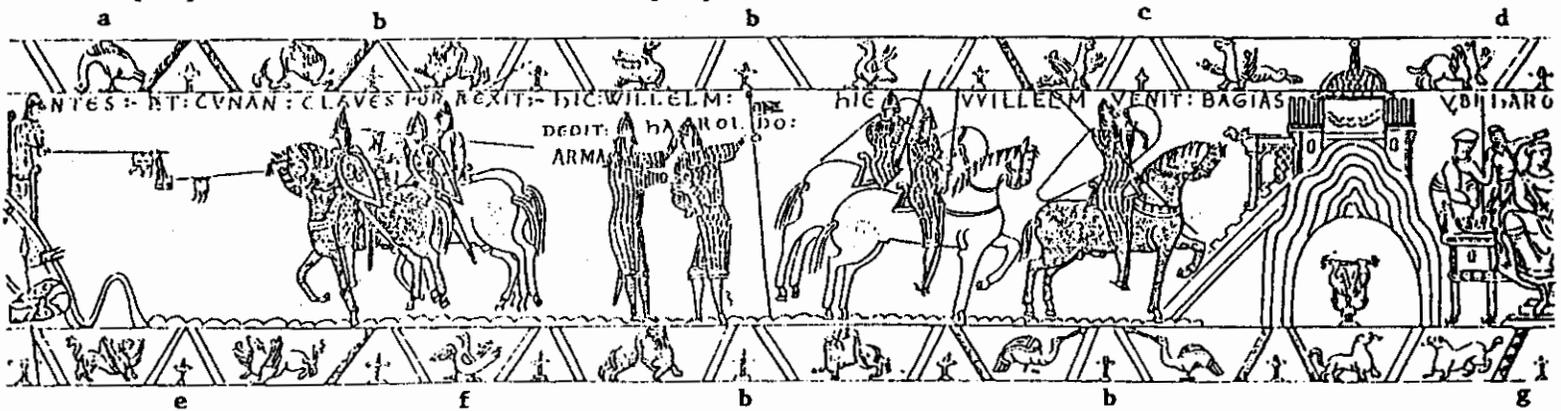


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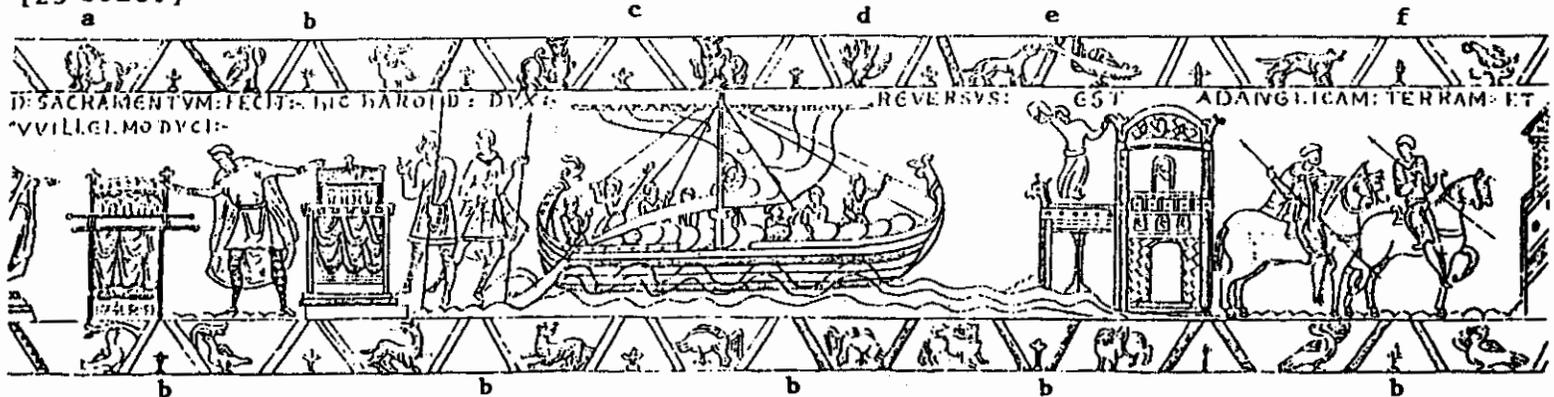
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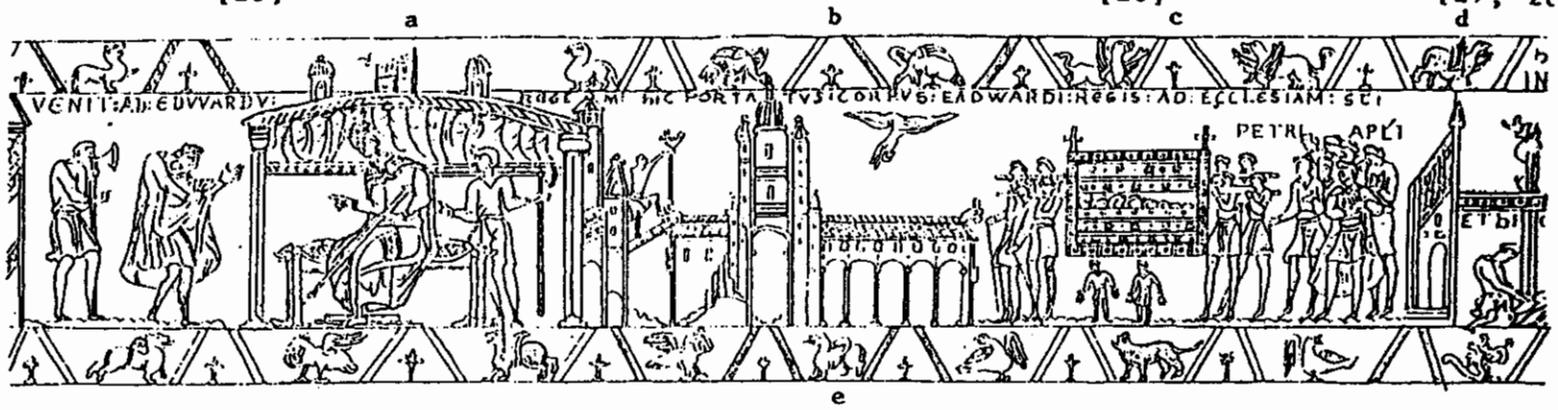
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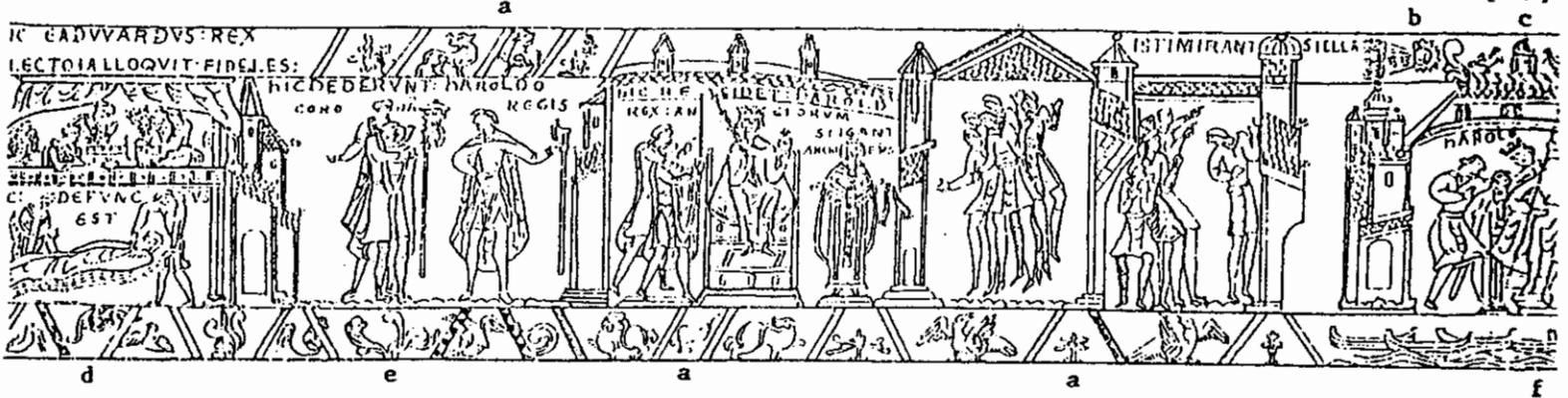
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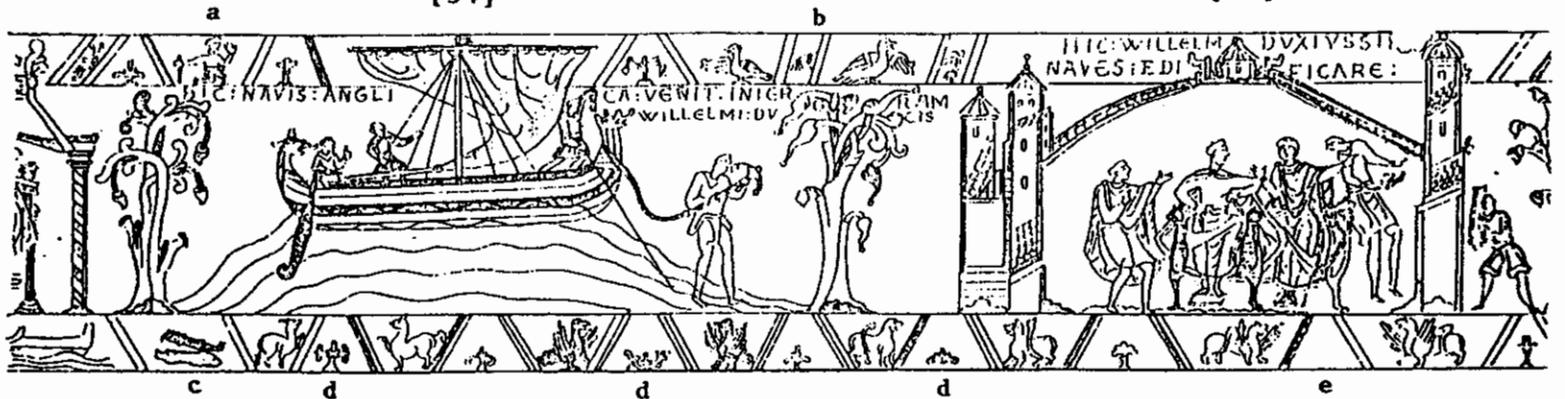
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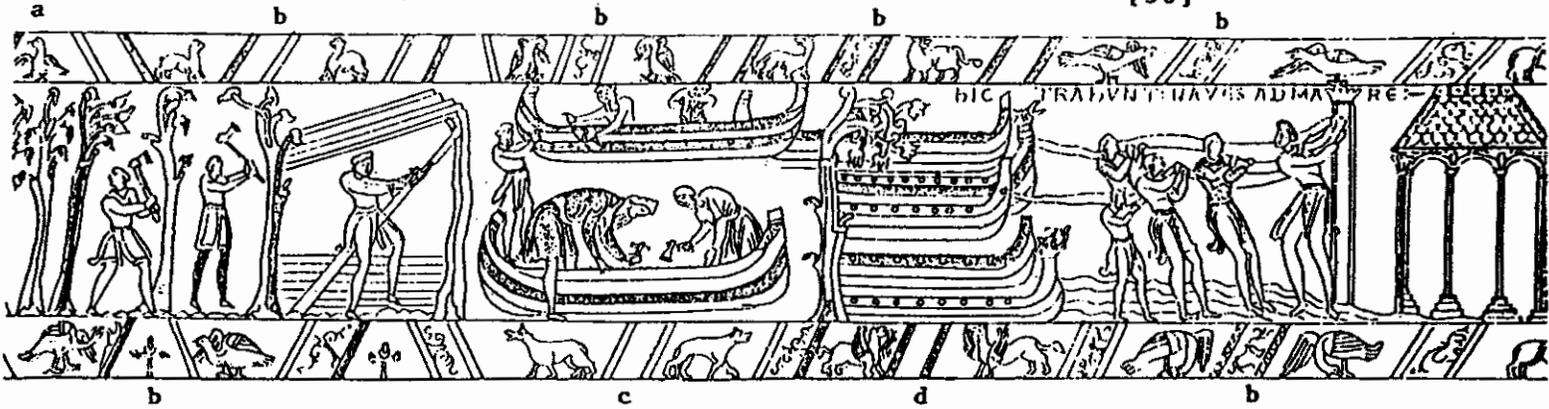
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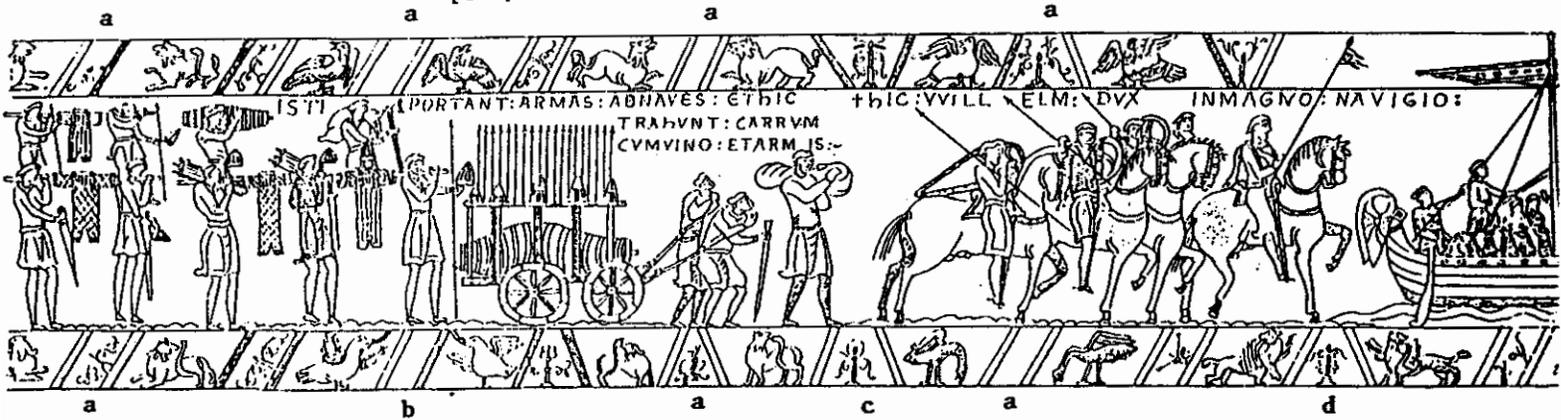
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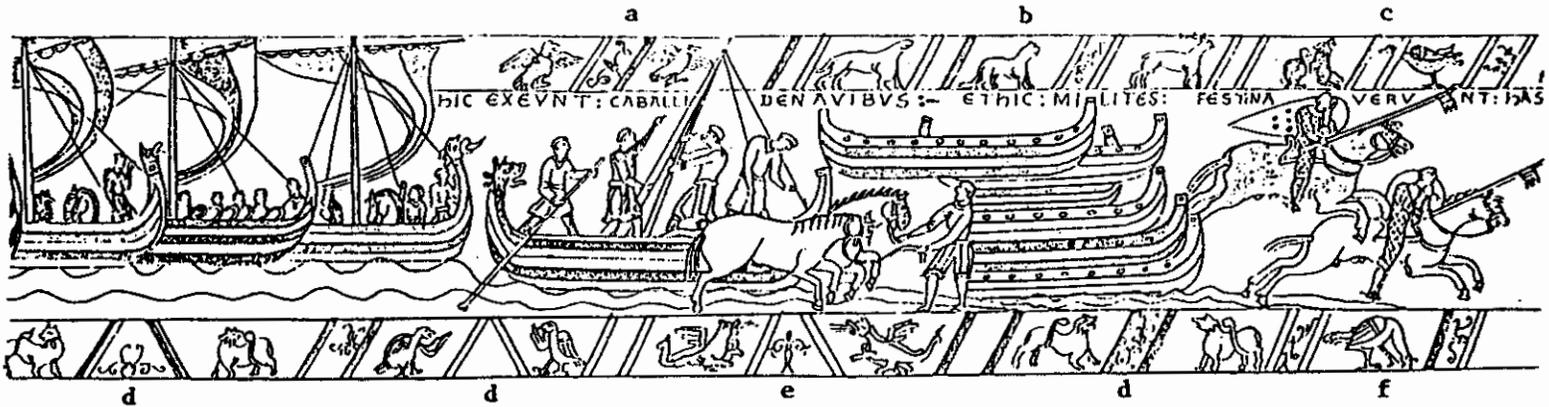
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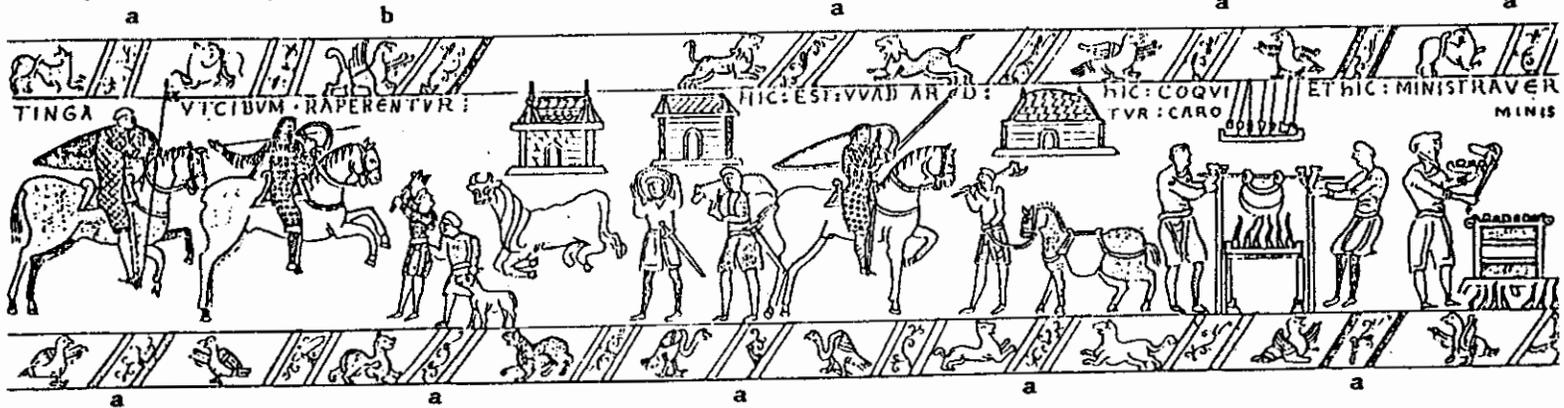
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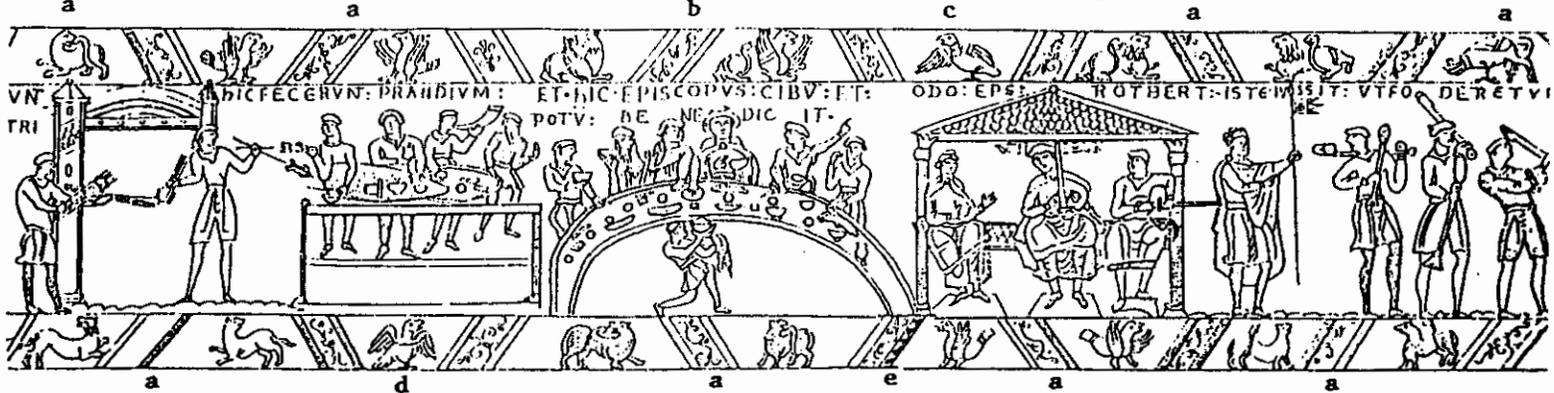
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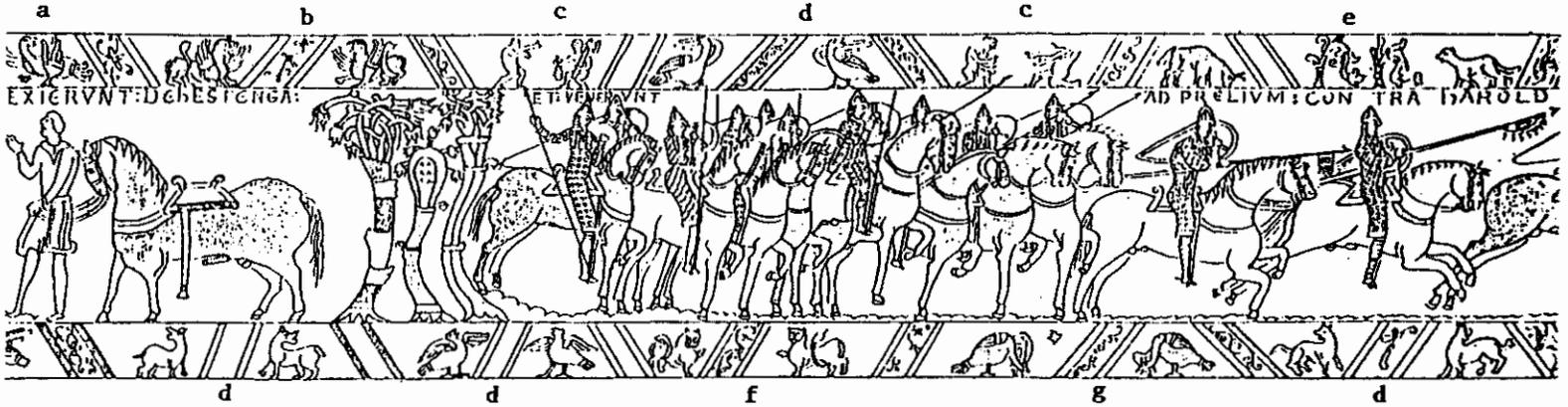
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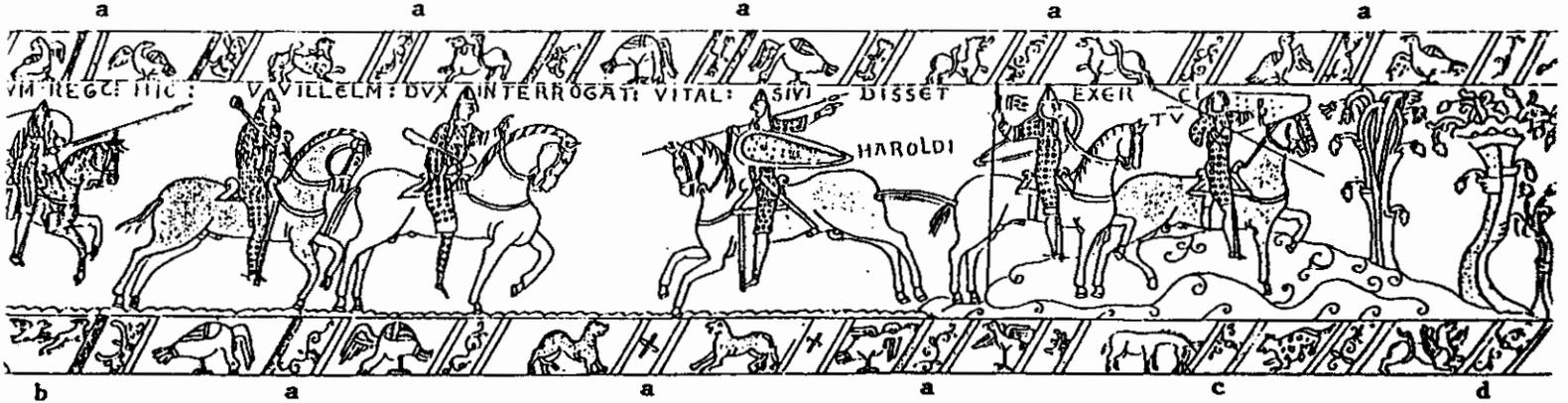
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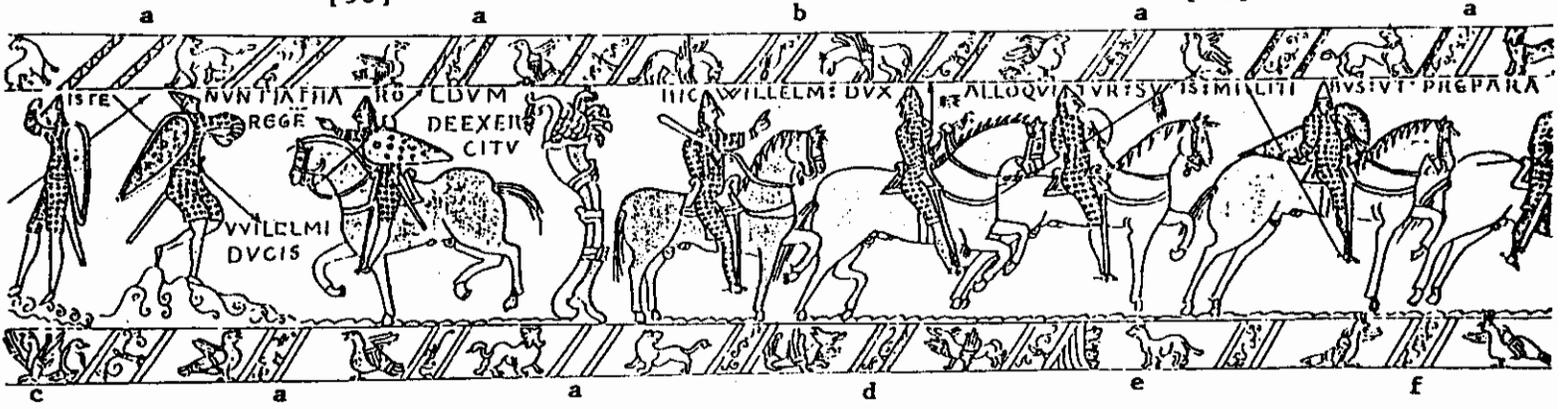


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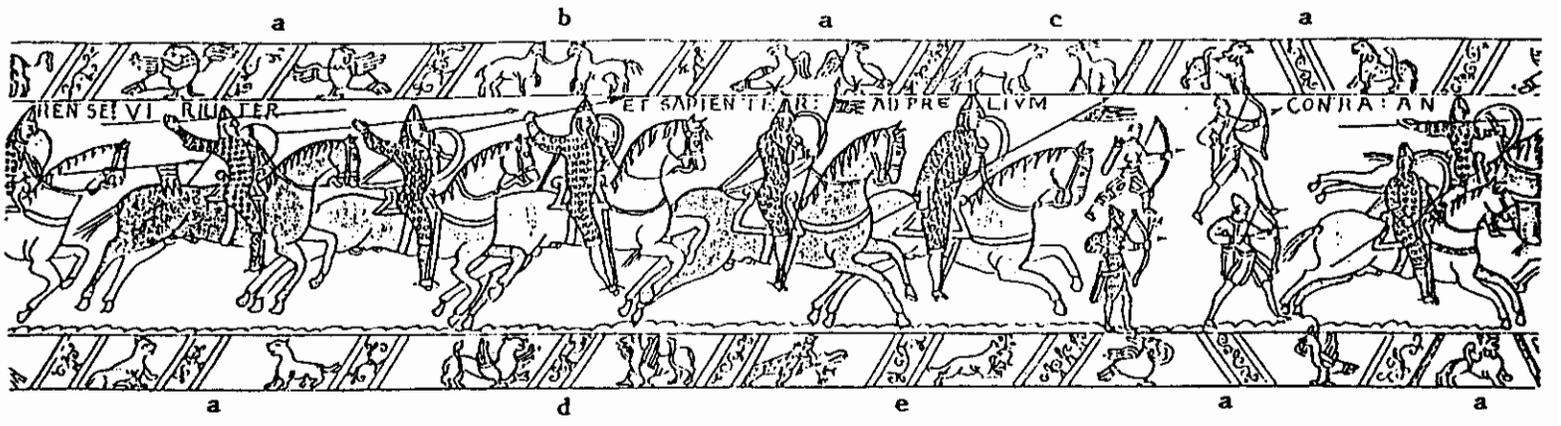


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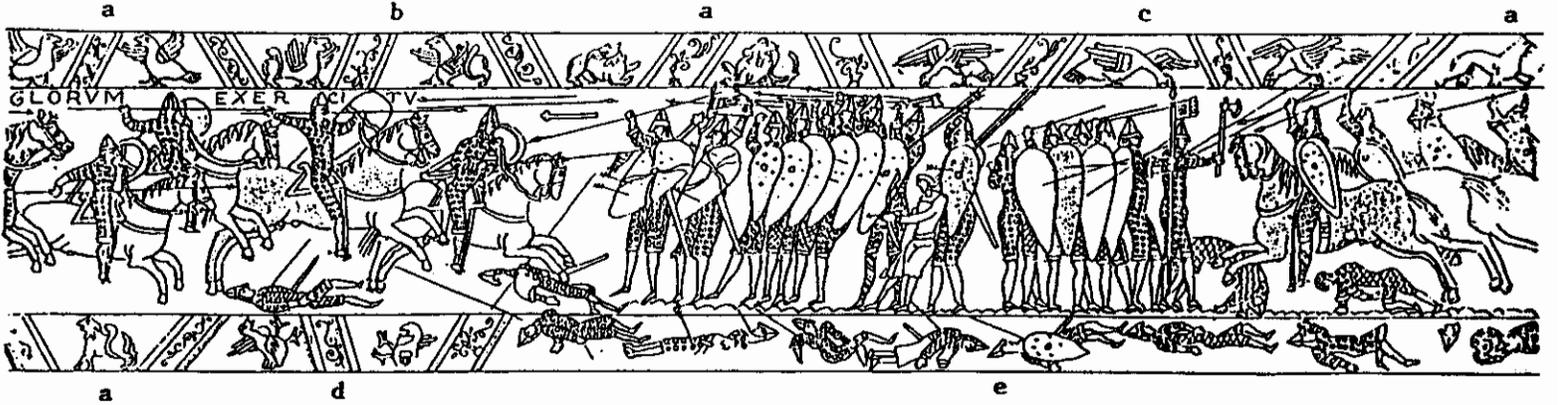
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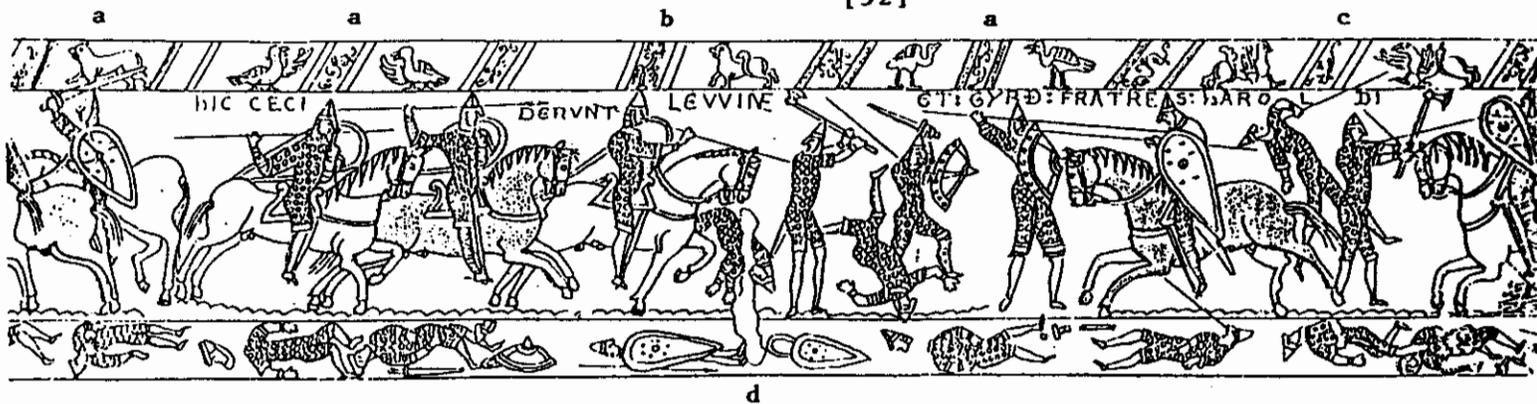
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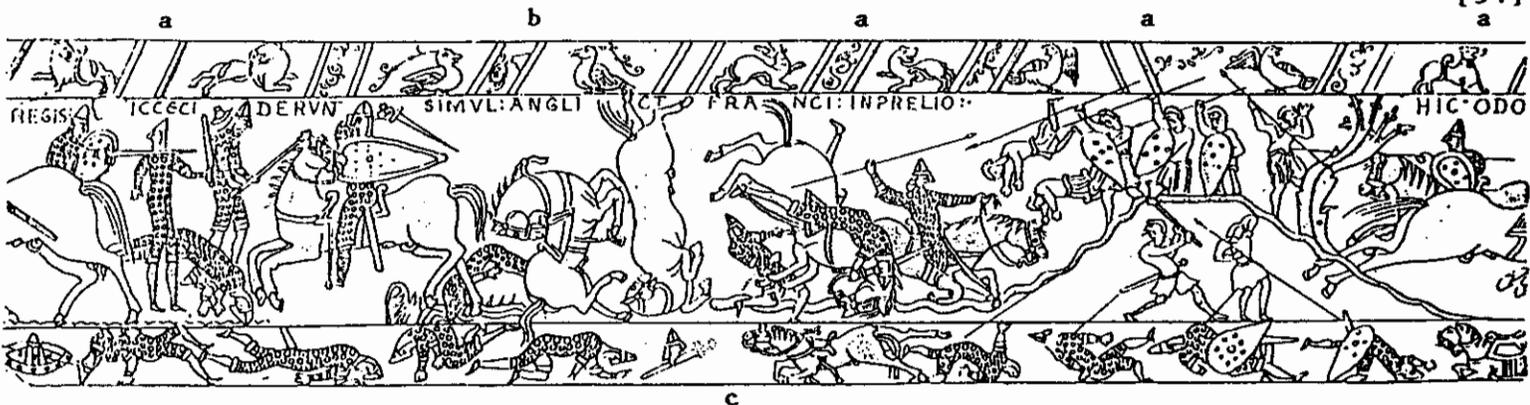
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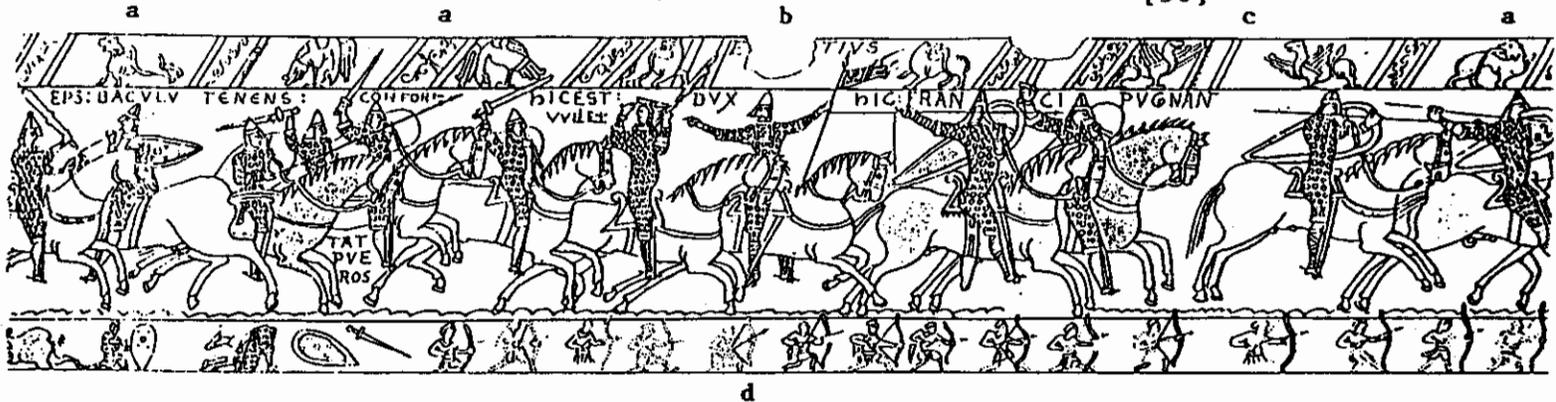


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