

Essay: How useful is the Bayeux Tapestry as a source for the events surrounding the Norman invasion of England?



Fig. 1. Dbuo Photography, *Bayeux Tapestry*, CC BY-SA 2.0, <<https://openverse.org/image/1f841b00-fecb-4f7a-a91d->> [accessed 11 May 2026].

Introduction

The Bayeux Tapestry is a unique near-contemporary visual primary source that depicts the events leading up to the Norman Conquest of England in 1066. Although referred to as a tapestry, it is in fact constructed from eight linen panels that are joined together to make a 68-metre long by 50 centimetres high piece of work, onto which the design has been embroidered.¹ The Tapestry takes the viewer on a journey, scene by scene, through time in which it tells the story of one of the most significant events in English history. On face value, it is a piece of art that was commissioned by the Normans to commemorate their victory over the English. From that perspective it would be reasonable to expect it to be fundamentally biased, but that is not completely true. There is strong evidence that points to the Tapestry having been created in England by the defeated Anglo-Saxons, and that it is less pro-Norman than it might first appear, also containing an 'English Voice'. The piece is far more complex than it presents on first reading, containing multiple layers of ambiguity and a subtle sub-text. This essay will argue that the Bayeux Tapestry is a valuable source of contemporary material culture. Additionally, its value also comes from what can be learnt from the construction of the narrative; what it omits to say and

¹ David Musgrove and Michael Lewis, *The Story of the Bayeux Tapestry: Unraveling the Norman Conquest* (Thames & Hudson, 2021), pp. 32-33.

how it was designed to direct the viewer's interpretation of events justifying the Norman Conquest and providing legitimacy to the subsequent Norman Rule.

Provenance, Patronage and the Audience

There are no contemporary records for the genesis of the Bayeux Tapestry, the first record of the Tapestry is in the 1476 Inventory of Bayeux Cathedral.² It was not 'rediscovered' until the 18th century.³ The key questions asked about the Tapestry are who commissioned the Tapestry; when was the Tapestry made; who made the Tapestry and where; who was the intended audience. In the early 19th century opinion was divided between the Tapestry having been created by Matilda, William the Conqueror's queen, or, commissioned by Odo, Bishop of Bayeux, who was William's half-brother.⁴ Further inspection during the mid-19th century agreed it was most likely to have been commissioned by Odo, given the position of power he held in England in 1066; the fact that he's the only Norman ecclesiastic figure to appear on the Tapestry and the inscription in the oath scene places Harold in Bayeux (of which Odo was Bishop), whereas chronicles by William of Jumièges and Orderic Vitalis place the oath swearing in Bonneville and Rouen respectively.⁵ The same scholars who determined that the Tapestry had been commissioned by Odo also concluded that it was most likely to have been created in the 11th century due to the style of the Norman dress and hairstyles, both of which changed significantly after 1066.⁶

Where the Tapestry was made and by whom plays an important part in the way in which can be read, especially the subtle sub-text. During the middle-ages, England was well known throughout Europe for its very high-quality ecclesiastical embroidery, known as '*Opus Anglicanum*'.⁷ This may give some credence to the idea that the Tapestry was created in England, but more substantive evidence comes from the actual designs themselves. Some of which appear to have been borrowed from the illuminations of

2 David J. Bernstein, *The Mystery of the Bayeux Tapestry* (Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1987), p. 28.

3 Pierre, Bouet, *The Bayeux Tapestry: Embroidering the Facts of History* (Presses Universitaires de Caen, 2004), p. 18.

4 Ibid., p. 17.

5 Bernstein, *The Mystery of the Bayeux Tapestry*, pp. 29-30.

6 Ibid., p. 29.

7 Ibid., p. 38.

several manuscripts including *The Old English Hexateuch*.⁸ There are three main schools of thought as to its intended audience. The first that it was intended for a religious setting, Odo's new cathedral in Bayeux consecrated in July 1077 would fit well with that scenario, especially if Odo was the person to commission the Tapestry.⁹ The second is that it was intended for a secular audience.¹⁰ Finally, there is the idea that the Tapestry was never destined for just one location, as textiles are lightweight it was designed to be portable meaning it could be seen by a far greater audience.¹¹ Cowdrey suggests that if this were the case it may have travelled with a guide or interpreter.¹² The fact that the Tapestry was created in post-invasion England where the ruling Normans and the conquered English were working out the complexities of a new regime, make it a valuable source for post-invasion cultural negotiation.

Constructing the Narrative



Fig. 2. ancientartpodcast.org, Comet Halley, *Bayeux Tapestry*, Scene 32, CC BY-SA 2.0, <<https://openverse.org/image/a317a6f2-40c8-4ba7-9610-7dd1384e775f?q=bayeux+tapestry&p=11>> [accessed 11 May 2026].

8 David Musgrove, and Lewis Michael, 'The Bayeux Tapestry: Michael Lewis and Dave Musgrove in Conversation', YouTube, 7 January 2022 <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l57UE5kvneo>> [accessed 10 April 2026]

Note – the segment that discusses this point starts at 05:50

⁹ Musgrove and Lewis, *The Story of the Bayeux Tapestry*, p. 49.

¹⁰ Gale, Owen-Crocker, 'Brothers, rivals and the geometry of the Bayeux Tapestry' in *King Harold II and the Bayeux Tapestry*, ed. by Gale, Owen-Crocker (Woodbridge, Boydell & Brewer Ltd, 2005), pp. 109-123.

¹¹ Carola Hicks, *The Bayeux Tapestry: Biography of a Masterpiece* (Chatto & Windus, 2006), p. 25.

¹² H. E. J. Cowdrey in 'Towards an interpretation of the Bayeux Tapestry' (*Anglo-Norman Studies*, 10, (1988), pp. 49-65.

The Tapestry was primarily designed to legitimise William's claim to the English throne and to justify the invasion on the grounds that it was a 'bellum iustum' (Latin: just war).¹³ The narrative is constructed using authorship, selective sequencing, propaganda and visual language. The work is far more complex than it initially appears, with multiple layers of complexity and sub-text created using a skilful combination of omissions, manipulations and strategic ambiguity that support the Norman ideology.

The use of terse inscriptions (Latin: tituli) in the Tapestry is an example of how the viewer may be manipulated into arriving at a pro-Norman interpretation, due to the minimal contextual information given by the inscriptions. For example, the inscription, VBI HAROLD DVX ANGLORVM ET SUI MILITES EQVITANT AD BOSHAM, (Where Harold, Duke of the English, and his knights, ride to Bosham). It is impossible to tell from this inscription why Harold travelled to Bosham prior to departing for Normandy, most likely in 1065. When viewed in the context of the Tapestry, the most straightforward interpretation is that he is about to embark on his journey to Normandy to confirm William's succession and to pledge fealty to him. This version of events is supported by the Norman record, The Gesta Guillelmi, created by William of Poitiers in the 11th century.¹⁴ However, English texts present several alternative reasons for the journey.¹⁵

The limited number of inscriptions means that the strength of the Tapestry depends upon the way in which the narrative has been visually represented. Here the designer succeeded in enriching the narrative by skilful positioning or representation of people and objects. One example is the inclusion of the comet (scene 29) which appeared in the night skies over Europe in early 1066, just a few months after Harold's coronation.¹⁶

13 Pierre, Bouet, *The Bayeux Tapestry*. p. 146.

14 William of Poitiers, *Gesta Guillelmi*, ed. and trans. R. H. C. Davis and Marjorie Chibnall (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), p. xxvi.

15 **Reason 1** – an ill-fated fishing trip. William of Malmesbury:

Gesta Regum Anglorum, The History of the English Kings, Vol2, trans. Rodney M. Thomson and Michael Winterbottom, (Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 147.

Reason 2 - Harold was on a mission to free his brother Wulfnorth and nephew Hakon who had been held hostage: Eadmer, *Historia Novorum in Anglia*, ed. and trans. G Bosanquet (Chester Springs: Dufour Editions, 1964). p7.

Reason 3 - The negotiation of a marriage alliance, which may have been for Harold to marry William's daughter Adeliza: Orderic Vitalis, *Historia Ecclesiastica*, The Ecclesiastical History of Orderic Vitalis, ed. and trans. by M. Chibnall (Clarendon Press, 1969).

16 Andrew Bridgeford, *1066: The Hidden History in the Bayeux Tapestry* (Bloomsbury Publishing USA, 2009), pp. 114-115.

Commonly understood by the people at that time, both Anglo-Saxon and Norman, to be a 'divinely ordained portent' it represents God's wrath at Harold's for breaking a sacred oath and serves as a warning to viewers of Harold's impending fate.¹⁷ The entire Tapestry pivots on the oath scene (scene 23), a very intentionally constructed scene in which it shows Harold swearing an oath, on Holy Relics. The scene is designed to emphasize the binding spiritual and spiritual nature of the oath. The complex, carefully orchestrated nature of the Tapestry makes it a good source from which to study how Norman propaganda was constructed and portrayed.

The 'English Voice'

As previously stated, there is very persuasive evidence that the Tapestry was born out of a synthesis of Norman design and Anglo-Saxon execution. This unusual collaboration between the conquerors and the conquered has resulted in a piece of visual art that could be less pro-Norman than it first appears. It allowed for the inclusion of a covert Anglo-Saxon commentary, giving the Tapestry an 'English Voice'.¹⁸

The main, sequenced narrative is told in the central panel of the Tapestry, above and below which are narrower borders or margins that also contain embroidered images of Aesop's fables.¹⁹ Early interpretation of these images by Francis Wormald in 1957, suggests that they are not linked to the central narrative and are decorative in nature.²⁰ C. R. Dodwell in 1966 introduced the idea that the fables are strategic, not decorative, carrying a pro-Norman message. This theory that was challenged in the same year by a letter to the Times newspaper in which it argued that the fables reflected badly on the Normans, not Harold and were a subversive message that was intended to counter the Norman narrative.²¹ This idea of an 'English Voice' relies on the assumption that the Tapestry was created in England.

¹⁷ Ibid., pp. 115-116.

¹⁸ Pastan, Elizabeth Carson, Stephen D. White, and Kate Gilbert, *The Bayeux Tapestry and Its Contexts: A Reassessment* (Boydell & Brewer Ltd, 2014), pp. 154-158.

¹⁹ Ibid., pp. 154-182.

²⁰ Ibid., pp. 154-182.

²¹ Ibid., pp. 154-182.

Depending on the interpretation applied, the theory that the Tapestry contains covert Anglo-Saxon commentary makes it an excellent contemporary source of English sentiment post-invasion.

Omissions and Ambiguities



Fig. 3. ancientartpodcaset.org, 'Bayeux Tapestry Scene 23, CC BY-SA 2.0, < <https://openverse.org/image/a317a6f2-40c8-4ba7-9610-7dd1384e775f?q=bayeux+tapestry&p=11>> [accessed 11 May 2026].

Comparison between the narrative of the Bayeux Tapestry and events recorded in other sources identifies several omissions and ambiguities in the Tapestry. These are not accidental; they are generally necessary to allow a version of events that supports the Norman ideology over the factual and to deliver a cleaner, more streamlined version of events for the viewer. By careful planning, the Tapestry leads the viewer to the desired interpretation (from a Norman perspective). The most significant and disputed omission surrounds the oath scene. The Tapestry does not explicitly say that Harold swore an oath to support William's claim to the English throne, in fact it is silent on the nature of the oath, leaving that to the interpretation of the viewer.²² The oath scene depicts a crucial moment in the narrative, being pivotal to the key question, 'did Harold perjure himself when he took the English throne'?²³

Scene 58 of the Tapestry, depicting the death of Harold is a good example of ambiguity. The inscription reads, *HIC HAROLD REX INTERFECTVS EST*, (Here King Harold is killed).²⁴ The most important question to be asked about this scene is how did Harold die? According to Lucien Musset, there are 3 possible answers to this question. If we interpret

²² David and Lewis, *The Story of the Bayeux Tapestry*, p. 26.

²³ Ibid., p. 152.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 250.

the figure standing under the part of the inscription that says hAROLD, the King is seen to have died from an arrow in the eye but if the King is represented by the figure lying on the ground, he either died from the axe wound inflicted by the soldier on his right or by a mounted soldier under the word REX.²⁵ However, Bernstein's analysis further complicates the issue, he points out that in 1957 the idea of Harold being shot in the eye was subject to revisionist interpretation and dismissed in favour of Harold being more likely to be on the ground.²⁶ He then continues to add further complexity by say that, based on the work of 12th century writers, the Tapestry may have deliberately had two figures of Harold to depict him first being shot in the eye and then falling to the ground where he met his final fate.²⁷

One very important question is, why does the Tapestry not provide a more explicate explanation of events in the oath scene? The most widely accepted answer to this is that the omissions and ambiguities are present primarily because they serve the overall object of the Tapestry which is to legitimise the Norman Invasion. Just from the political narrative perspective alone, this makes the Tapestry a valuable source of events related to the Norman Invasion and its accompanying ideology.

The Material Culture of War



Fig. 4. Ulrich Harsh, *Bayeux Tapestry*, < http://www.hs-augsburg.de/~harsch/Chronologia/Lspost11/Bayeux/bay_tama.html; > [accessed 11 May 2026].

25 Musset, Lucien, *The Bayeux Tapestry*, trans. by Richard Rex (Boydell Press, 2023), pp. 256-257.

26 David J. Bernstein, *The Mystery of the Bayeux Tapestry*, p.145.

27 Ibid., p. 145.

One area in which the Tapestry can be used as a strong source for the events surrounding the invasion is where it shows the preparation needed for the Normans to launch the invasion. This is true for two reasons. Firstly, there would be very little political gain for the Normans in mis-representing the preparations, except perhaps to demonstrate their military prowess. Secondly, the way in which some of the scenes have been drawn suggests that they originate from first-hand observations of events.²⁸ The Tapestry depicts such events as the felling of trees; the building of the invasion fleet and the horses being transported across the Channel. The magnitude of the work needed to ready everything for the invasion is very clearly documented in the Tapestry, perhaps more so that can be found in any written source. Another area in which the Tapestry provides a strong source of evidence is in scene 45 which depicts a motte being constructed in Hastings by a gang of labourers, showing just how quickly the Normans could establish defensive positions in hostile environments.²⁹

Meanings That Are Lost in Time: Aelfgyva

There are several scenes in the Tapestry that highlight its limitations as a source to the modern viewer. Over time, the ability to understand or decipher the images has been lost. An example of this is the scene in which a lady called Aelfgyva is depicted. She must have been a person of great significance as she is one of only three women depicted in the main frieze of the Tapestry and is the only named woman.³⁰ There is a Latin inscription 'UBI UNUS CLERICUS ET AELFGYVA' (Where a certain clerk and Aelfgyva) at the top of the scene, which seems incomplete (deliberately so), leaving the viewer to decipher the meaning based on the images. The scene may contain visual symbols that would have been easily identified by contemporary viewers but the meaning of which has been lost over time. In such instances, the Tapestry has limited value as a source.

28 Wolfgang Grape, *The Bayeux Tapestry: Monument to a Norman Triumph* (Prestel Publishing, 1994), pp. 28-29.

29 Bouet, Pierre, *The Bayeux Tapestry: Embroidering the Facts of History* (Presses Universitaires de Caen, 2004). p. 279.

30 Andrew Bridgeford, *1066: The Hidden History of the Bayeux Tapestry* (HarperCollins UK, 2004), p. 247.

Comparison With Written Sources

There is no other extant, contemporary, visual source against which to validate the Tapestry, therefore it is necessary to look to the written word. Textual sources which document the Norman Conquest can be broadly categorised as either being Norman or English in their origin – see Appendix A.

There is a high degree of polarization between the Norman and the English texts. The Normans texts show a strong narrative consistency that is almost completely aligned with the version of events depicted on the Bayeux Tapestry. William Jumièges' *Gesta Normannorum Ducum* established the legal argument for William's succession to the throne.³¹ Whilst William of Poitiers' work then built on Jumièges' narrative in his own *Gesta Guillelmi*, linking it to the visual narrative of the Tapestry, thus creating a unified account of Harold's perjury and justification for the invasion.³² The agreement between the Tapestry's pro-Norman ideology and the written Norman texts confirm it as a valuable, contemporary source of events.

Historiographical Shift

One very important point to consider when deciding if the Bayeux Tapestry is useful as a source, is its historiographical interpretation. This has undergone substantial change from early scholarship which used it as a mostly reliable factual record that could provide evidence of material culture, especially military material culture, to supplement the written accounts. Hilaire Belloc is a good example of this, writing at the start of the twentieth century said, 'The object of all this kind of work in every age where it has flourished ... is to establish a *record*'.³³ In Belloc's 1914 work, *The Book of the Bayeux Tapestry*, he acknowledges that the Tapestry tells nothing of the content of the oath but believes that it is the promise of the crown of England.³⁴

³¹David and Lewis, *The Story of the Bayeux Tapestry*, p. 33.

³² Ibid., p. 33.

³³ Hilaire, Belloc, *The Book of the Bayeux Tapestry* (London, Methuen, 1914), p. viii.

³⁴ Ibid., p. 31.

It is more recent scholars and historians that have come to position the Tapestry not so much as a record of events but rather a carefully created and sophisticated ideological narrative that was created to legitimise the actions of the newly ruling Norman elite. Looking through the lens of cultural history and visual studies, the Tapestry is now viewed differently, there has been a recognition of the inherent bias, ambiguity and omissions. Foys, Overbey and Terkla (editors) comment in the introduction to their 2009 book, *The Bayeux Tapestry: A New interpretation*, that in the two decades prior to their work, scholarship has taken an interpretive approach in which it examines, '... the textile's materiality, visuality, reception and historiography and its construction of gender, territory and cultural memory'.³⁵

Due to this historiographical shift, the way in which the Tapestry can be seen as a useful source of events has significantly changed, with the more modern view delivering an even greater degree of information about the events, supplementing rather than completely overturning the earlier, more factual approach.

Conclusion

The Bayeux Tapestry is a unique, valuable, near-contemporary primary source for the events surrounding the Norman Conquest. Not because it is a factual record, it is biased, there are omissions and ambiguities; but rather because of the way in which it was created as a masterful piece of Norman ideology and a device for establishing legitimacy. Analysing the way in which the Tapestry was constructed provides an insight into how historical events can be transformed into authoritative narrative. It also provides a detailed visual record of the material culture of 11th century warfare and logistics that is quite extraordinary. Importantly, it is a cultural artefact that tells of the tension between the new ruling Norman elite and the subjugated English who stitched the story of their own defeat and in doing so were able to include some of their own story too. There is an adage that says, 'History is written by the victors'. In this case that isn't completely true.

35 Martin K. Foys, Karen Eileen Overbey, and Dan Terkla, *The Bayeux Tapestry: New Interpretations* (Boyle Press, 2016), p. Front Matter.

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Appendix A

The key Norman texts:

Guy de Amiens' *Carmen de Hastingae* (1067)

William of Jumièges' *Gesta Normannorum Ducum* (1070s)

William of Poitiers' *Gesta Guillelmi*.

Written before 1060, it was updated by the author in 1070 to include a record of the Norman Conquest

The key English texts:

The Anglo-Saxon Chronicles (11th and 12th centuries)

Versions C, D & E

The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle: *Assessment of William I* (1087)

Ender: *Historia* (1093 x 1119)

Florence of Worcester's *Chronicon ex Chronicis* (c.1140)