

IDENTITY AND MYTH: THE NORMANS

HPHI 6009

1902832 - DAVID LEWIS

ASSIGNMENT TWO - ESSAY

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

The Bayeux Tapestry is one of the significant primary sources in respect of the Norman invasion of England, which unusually is well documented for a medieval battle.¹ This along with other primary sources forms the basis for what is known and its subsequent historical analysis.² Perhaps due to the transformation nature of the Norman invasion as an event in English and European history, and the uniqueness of the Tapestry itself; this has resulted in a rich academic discourse.³ Central to this discourse has been an ongoing debate and consideration of the tapestries' usefulness as a historical source and the accuracy of the images depicting the events of the Norman invasion of England. In this essay I will seek to explore the question of the tapestry's usefulness as a historical source in understanding the events of 1066 by conducting an analysis of the tapestry and comparing the tapestry with three key primary sources: William of Poitiers '*Gesta Willelmi*'; William of Jumieges '*Gesta Normannorum Ducum*'; and the Saxon Chronicles, by drawing on the academic discourse and linking to key scenes from the tapestry.

The Bayeux tapestry is one of the earliest sources for the Norman invasion and along with five other significant primary sources⁴ forms the basis for our understanding of the events around the invasion. The tapestry is unique in being primarily a pictorial narrative while the other significant primary sources are written accounts. The tapestry has been

¹ S Morillo. '*The Battle of Hastings*,' (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 1996), p. 1.

² Ibid. p.1

³ S.A. Brown, *The Bayeux Tapestry: History and Bibliography*. (Woodbridge, Boydell Press, 1988).

⁴ Morillo, '*The Battle of Hastings*,' p. 1. According to Morillo the six most significant sources are: William of Poitiers, '*Gesta Willelmi*'; William of Jumieges, '*Gesta Normannorum Ducum*'; the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, Florence of Worcester, '*Chronicon ex Chronicis*'; the Bayeux Tapestry; and the '*Carmen de Hastingae Proelio*.'

described as a “unparalleled work of art and a historical document of the first order.”⁵ The tapestry is an embroidery presenting a detailed pictorial narrative of the events leading up to the Norman invasion and of the Battle of Hastings. It has an embroidered text and consists of 58 scenes⁶ made using woolen thread on nine unequal strips of linen cloth joined together and measures approx 64m long and 50 cm wide.⁷

The tapestry begins with an embroidered image of King Edward sitting on his throne with Harold beside him (1). Harold then crosses to France where he is captured by Count Guy (4-6,7). Duke William secures his release (13) and Harold joins William on campaign in Brittany (16-20). In what many people regard as the key scene⁸ Harold makes an oath to Duke William (23) and returns to England (24). The next two scenes are oddly shown in the reverse order, showing King Edward’s body being carried to church (27) followed by Edward dying in bed (28). Harold is then depicted being crowned King (30). People are then seen looking at a comet while Harold sits on his throne (32-33). On being informed, Duke William orders ships to be built and provisioned (35-37) which then sail to Pavensey (38-39) where they disembark and make camp (40-43). A castle is built at Hastings (45) with William receiving word of Harold (46). Knights set out from Hastings to meet Harold (48). William is shown exhorting his knights for battle (50). The next scenes show battle scenes. At the end of the tapestry the embroidered commentary reads ‘here is King Harold . Has been killed’ (57). The last scene shows the English fleeing the battle(58).

Key to understanding its usefulness is the need to understand its provenance, its patron, date and purpose. The tapestry was first documented in 1476 in an inventory of textiles in Bayeux cathedral.⁹ Its earlier history concerning when it was made, its original function, purpose and who it was commissioned for remains uncertain.¹⁰ The earliest commentators believed that it was produced in Normandy¹¹. However, there is now a general consensus that the tapestry is of an English manufacture.¹² This view is supported by the Tapestry’s inscriptions and use of English spelling. ‘AELFGYVA’ and ‘EDWARDVS’ are both spelt using English spelling,¹³ the way Harold is referred

⁵ L. Musset, *‘The Bayeux Tapestry.’* (Nantes: Artaud Freses, 1998), p. 2.

⁶ For the purposes of this essay references to scene numbers will be in accordance to those in Musset, *‘The Bayeux Tapestry.’*

⁷ Musset, *‘The Bayeux Tapestry.’* p.18.

⁸ R. Huscroft, *‘The Norman Conquest. A new Introduction’.* (Harlow: Pearson Education Ltd, 2009). p. 13.

⁹ E.C. Pastan, S.D. White, and K. Gilbert, *‘The Bayeux Tapestry and its Contexts. A reassessment’.* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2014). p. 73.

¹⁰ A. Bridgeford. *‘1066. The Hidden History of the Bayeux Tapestry.’* (London: Harper Perennial, 2004), p.5.

¹¹ F.R. Fowke, *The Bayeux Tapestry. A History and Description’.* (London: George Bell and Sons, 1898). p3.

¹² Musset, *‘The Bayeux Tapestry’.* p. 11.

¹³ M.J. Lewis, *‘The Real World of the Bayeux Tapestry.’* (Stroud: The History Press, 2008), p.11.

to, together with how cavalry and hauberks are depicted.¹⁴ Additionally, Anglo-Saxon embroidery was famed in Europe,¹⁵ and the style of the tapestry is similar to eleventh century Anglo-Saxon manuscripts.¹⁶ There are also clear links between Kent and Bayeux; Bishop Odo being a patron of St Augustine's Abbey in Canterbury, Bishop of Bayeux and Earl of Kent.

This brings us to consideration as to who commissioned the tapestry. Early commentators supported Matilda who was William the Conqueror's wife as patron.¹⁷ However, there is now a general consensus that the tapestry was either commissioned by or for Bishop Odo of Bayeux.¹⁸ Odo was William's half-brother and was granted the earldom of Kent soon after the Norman Conquest and was the second largest landholder in England after William.¹⁹ He also appears prominently in the tapestry and is one of few to be directly named (54). Three others named have been identified as his retainers; Turolde, Wadard and Vital.²⁰

There is a general consensus that the tapestry was completed in the early years following the Invasion. If the tapestry was made for Odo then its date is likely to have been before Odo fell from grace and imprisonment in 1082. It has been proposed that if the tapestry was produced in England at St Augustine's Abbey this might date the tapestry to 1072-1077 during Abbot Scotland's tenure as abbot. Abbot Scotland previously came from Mont-Saint-Michel and was enthroned in 1072. This might explain the inclusion of Mont-Saint-Michel (16) in the tapestry.²¹

An analysis of the tapestry also raises a number of issues. Its uncertain early provenance and its exact purpose and function are unknown as already stated. The tapestry is incomplete and has missing sections at the beginning and the end. It has been speculated that the final scene could have been of William being crowned which would be a natural end and mirror the first scene showing King Edward on his throne.²²

¹⁴ N. Brooks and H.E Walker in M.J.Lewis, "*The Real World of the Bayeux Tapestry*," p. 11.

¹⁵ S.M. Levey and King.D. '*The Victoria and Albert Museum's Textile Collection. Embroidery in Britain 1200-1750*', (London: Victoria and Albert Museum, 1993). p.10.

¹⁶ F. Wormald in F. Stenton (ed), *The Bayeux Tapestry. A Comprehensive Survey*. (London: The Phaidon Press, 1965) and in Lewis '*The Real World of the Bayeux Tapestry*,' p.17.

¹⁷ F.R. Fowke, '*The Bayeux Tapestry. A History and Description*,' (London: George Bell and Sons), p.9. The exhibition handbook prepared for its exhibition at the Musee Napoleon in 1803 was entitled '*Notice historique sur la Tapisserie broderie de la reine Mathilde, epouse de Guillaume-le-Conquerant*.'

¹⁸ L.Musset, '*The Bayeux Tapestry*,' (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2005), p. 17 and Bridgeford, "*1066. The Hidden History of the Bayeux Tapestry*," p. 5.

¹⁹ Lewis, '*The Real World of the Bayeux Tapestry*,' p.9.

²⁰ Ibid, p.10.

²¹ R. Gameson, '*The Study of the Bayeux tapestry*' (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 1999).

²² F. Stenton, (ed), *The Bayeux Tapestry. A Comprehensive Survey*. (London: The Phaidon Press, 1965). Musset, '*The Bayeux Tapestry*,' p. 266.

The tapestry has been subject to repair.²³ This is particularly evident in the last scene showing the English fleeing the battle due to the inferior nature of the embroidery (58). Scene 57 shows a knight pulling an arrow from his eye below the words “HAROLD.” It has been speculated that the arrow may be a repair and could have been a lance.²⁴ Lewis has commented on the need to refer to pre-reconstruction etchings and illustrations of Bernard de Mountaucaon and Charles Stothard.²⁵ There is a need to understand the interrelationship between one scene and the next and the possibility that scenes can have multiple meanings.²⁶ Although at first sight the tapestry can be seen to present a Norman perspective there are aspects where its meaning and point of view can have other interpretations. Bridgeford has referred to the tapestry as being a ‘Trojan horse’ and can be interpreted as representing a subversive account of Norman claims to the throne of England.²⁷ It is in these aspects that makes the Bayeux tapestry different from the other primary sources and needs to be approached critically.

If one accepts that the tapestry was completed shortly after 1066 then it can clearly be described as an important primary source. This then raises questions as to how the tapestry corroborates or differs from the other primary sources. Of the five significant primary sources named by Morillo,²⁸ William of Poitiers account is the longest and most complete account of the battle. He wrote his *Gesta Willelmi ducis Normannorum et regis Anglorum*, ‘The Deeds of William, Duke of the Normans and King of the English’ around 1071.²⁹ He was a Norman, had been a soldier, a priest and was a ducal chaplain.³⁰ Although he did not take part in the Invasion he had access to those who had taken part. Arguably his sources for his history were based on his experience as a fighting man, information gathered from his acquaintance with Duke William and members of his court.³¹ His account can be considered both generally reliable and contemporary.³² In his account he is clearly writing from a biased Norman perspective and clearly admires Duke William. He can be considered less reliable in looking at the actions and motivations of King Harold and the Anglo Saxons. His prose is panegyric in style and presents events by drawing on prose which is heroic and epic in character and brings in references from the classics including Xerxes, Caesar, Cicero and Tacitus.

²³ Lewis, ‘*The Real World of the Bayeux Tapestry*.’ p.21.

²⁴ I.W. Walker, ‘*Harold the Last Anglo-Saxon King*.’ (Stroud: the History Press, 2010).

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Morillo, ‘*The Battle of Hastings*,’ p.33.

²⁷ Bridgeford, ‘*The Hidden History of the Bayeux Tapestry*,’ p. 8.

²⁸ Morillo, ‘*The Battle of Hastings*,’ p.1.

²⁹ Morillo gives a date of c. 1071 while L. Thorpe in ‘*The Bayeux Tapestry and the Norman Invasion*’ (London: The Folio Society, 1973, p.32) gives a date c. 1073-1074

³⁰ Shopkow, ‘*History and Community. Norman History Writing in the Eleventh and Twelfth Centuries*,’ p. 43.

³¹ Foreville in Thorpe, ‘*The Bayeux Tapestry and the Norman Conquest*,’ p. 32.

³² Morillo, ‘*The Battle of Hastings*,’ p.3.



Pic.1. Scene 1. 'KING EDWARD. WHERE HAROLD'.

In comparing Williams' account to the tapestry it has many similarities to the events as depicted in the tapestry, and they can overall be seen to support one another. However this also depends on how the scenes in the tapestry are interpreted. This ambiguity can be seen in the tapestry's first scene (1) which depicts Edward sitting on his throne and talking to Harold. William of Poitiers states that Edward sent Harold to William "*In order to confirm his promise by an oath*"³³ in respect of William being Edward's heir. In the tapestry the accompanying text merely states "KING EDWARD. WHERE HAROLD" and gives no detail of what was discussed. This leaves the scene open to differing interpretations. This ambiguity of meaning is also evident in the famous oath scenes (23) where Harold is seen swearing an oath with his hands placed on holy relics. The tapestry inscription of these scenes states "WHERE HAROLD TOOK AN OATH" but provides no other details of the nature of the oath. William of Poitiers is clear in his account that Harold took an oath of his free will "*to ensure for him possession of the kingdom of England on Edward's death.*"³⁴ Again this ambiguity allows for differing interpretations of scene 23. It is possible that this ambiguity of meaning in the tapestry is

³³ William of Poitiers in Morrillo, 'The Battle of Hasdtings,' p.4.

³⁴ Ibid.

deliberate with the aim of the tapestry seeking to appeal to both Norman and English Anglo- Saxon sentiments. This perhaps hints at the new Anglo Norman reality of life in post invasion England.



Pic.2. Scene 23 'HERE WILLIAM CAME TO BAYEUX. WHERE HAROLD TOOK AN OATH TO DUKE WILLIAM'.

Although there are general similarities there are also significant differences. William states Harold took his oath at Bonneville-sur-Touques rather than Bayeux. There is a difference in the portrayal of the Brittany campaign and appears to recount a different version than that depicted in the tapestry. However, it is noted that the Breton campaign is only mentioned in William's and in the tapestry's accounts and not in the other sources. The tapestry shows Conan surrendering the keys of Dinan to Duke William whereas William describes how Conan retreated to Rennes and Duke William returned home rather than follow him deeper into Breton territory. The tapestry therefore shows a more complete victory. (scene 20).



Pic. 3. Scene 20 'AGAINST DINAN AND CONAN HANDS OVER THE KEYS'.

William of Poitiers and William of Jumieges both make a point of criticizing the speed of Harold being crowned (scene 30). A notable difference is William of Poitiers includes reference that Harold “*had withdrawn to Yorkshire to fight his own brother Tostig and the king of Norway*”³⁵ which refers to the Battle of Stamford Bridge. There is no reference to these events in the tapestry which has been questioned.³⁶ However for me this raises the question of the fundamental difference between the tapestry being an embroidered pictorial source as against the written sources. Written sources allow the writer freedom to sketch out and develop subplots and themes whereas, I would argue that a pictorial narrative is more constrained due to the need to maintain its overriding narrative. This can be seen to be similar to modern film adaptations of books which often have to follow simplified plotlines when compared to the original book. This perhaps adds another layer of complexity in relation to the tapestry in the need to understand the medium of its materiality.

William of Jumieges wrote about the Norman Invasion in his seventh book of his *Gesta Normannorum Ducum*, ‘Deeds of the dukes of the Normans.’³⁷ It is speculated that he may have begun his ‘gesta’ in the 1050’s updating and carrying on a history of the Normans started by Dudo of Saint-Quentin.³⁸ The existing versions date to 1071 or later which means it is also contemporary to the events. It is probable that he was a

³⁵ Ibid. p.9.

³⁶ Lewis, ‘The real World of the Bayeux Tapestry,’ p.21.

³⁷ Morillo, ‘The Battle of Hastings,’ p. 17.

³⁸ Shopkow, ‘History and Community. Norman History Writing in the Eleventh and Twelfth Centuries,’ p. 39.

Norman³⁹ although this is not certain and was a monk in the monastery at Jumieges. There is nothing known of William, his background, monastery position or his family.

Jumieges account generally follows the main themes of William of Poitiers and the tapestries account. He states that Edward had appointed William as his heir and at a later date sent Harold to William to confirm by oath; that Harold was captured by Guy; got released by William where he “*performed fealty to him in respect of the kingdom with many oaths, after which,*”⁴⁰ Harold was sent back with “many gifts”. Jumieges make an error in stating year of Edwards death, 1065 instead of 1066, and can also be seen to exaggerate the size of the fleet of ships, “*three thousand ships*”.⁴¹ He confirms Williams lands at Pavensey before moving onto Hastings and builds a castle in each. Jumieges account then covers the entire battle in only five lines of text and indicates that Harold died in the early stage of the battle.

Jumieges also writes from a biased Norman perspective. His account is significantly shorter and less detailed than William of Poitiers and it can be conjectured that he had less access to information around the invasion. His writing style is much simpler and straightforward and not panegyric in style. He describes Duke William in simple single / double adjectives such as Valiant Duke, eminent in council, wonderful virtues. He makes no mention of the Breton campaign and does not mention Harold fighting at Stamford Bridge. However, his history was copied and used by later chroniclers. There are forty five existing manuscripts of his ‘*gesta*’ which makes his history the most circulated⁴² and may indicate that his history was much better known than William of Poitiers account.

The Anglo- Saxon Chronicles are a group of related yearly annals which were compiled and edited in a number of differing monastery settings and three survive for the period around the events of the Norman invasion (Versions ‘C’, ‘D’ and ‘E’). Version ‘D’ is the only version that makes significant reference to the Battle of Hastings. These are written from an Anglo- Saxon perspective and all comment on the calamitous nature of the events of 1066. They can be seen to provide a striking contrast between the William of Poitiers and William of Jumieges’ accounts. None of the versions mentions Harold’s journey to France or Harold making an oath to William. All three versions give detailed accounts of Harold’s actions and battles against The King of Norway and Earl Tostig in the North prior to the battle of Hastings. Version C ends after the battle of Stamford

³⁹ Shopkow, ‘*History and Community. Norman History Writing in the Eleventh and Twelfth Centuries,*’ p.

41. Morillo in ‘The Battle of Hastings’ p. 17. refers to William of Jumieges as being a Norman

⁴⁰ William of Jumieges in Morillo, ‘*The Battle of Hastings,*’ p.18.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Shopkow, ‘*History and Community. Norman History Writing in the Eleventh and Twelfth Centuries,*’ p. 41.

Bridge and has no details of Battle of Hastings. Version D covers the battle of Hastings in four lines. It states that “*Count William came from Normandy to Pevensey on Michalmass eve*’.⁴³ It mentions they built a castle at Hastings, and when informed Harold assembled his army and “*came against him at the hoary apple tree*.”⁴⁴ It states the king fought hard, there were heavy casualties on both sides and that “*There King Harold was killed*”⁴⁵ and also mentions his brothers Earl Leofwine and Gyrth also died and “*the French remained masters of the field*.”⁴⁶ Version D therefore confirms some details as shown in the tapestry: Landing at Pevansey (39), castle at Hastings (45), death of Leofwane and Gyrth (52) and gives a sense of the ferocity of the battle as depicted in the tapestry. Version C and D also confirm the sight of a comet (33).



Plc. 4. Scene 39. ‘AND CAME TO PEVENSEY’.

In conclusion, the Bayeux tapestry is undoubtedly an important primary source for the events and period leading up to the Norman invasion and the battle of Hastings itself. Due to its uniqueness it allows an insight into the events in a way that written sources cannot. It can be seen to support the general tenant of the Norman view of the invasion and other sources such as William of Poitiers, but also can be seen to have clear Anglo-Saxon details embedded within the tapestry. Its uncertain provenance, purpose,

⁴³ Anglo- Saxon Chronicle version D in Morillo, ‘The Battle of Hastings’, p.24.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

together with the clear ambiguities that permeate the tapestry, mean that interpreting the tapestry is not straightforward. The tapestry can seem to raise as many questions as it answers. Fundamentally, its usefulness as a source perhaps is ultimately dependent on trying to get an understanding of its limitations and its possibilities and depends on the questions that historians ask and historians seeking to ask the right questions.

Bibliography.

Allen-Brown, R. '*The Norman Conquest. Documents of Medieval History 5*'. (London: Edward Arnold, 1984).

Bridgeford, A. '*1066. The Hidden History of the Bayeux Tapestry*'. (London: Harper Perennial, 2004).

Brown, S. A. '*The Bayeux Tapestry: History and Bibliography*'. (Woodbridge, Boydell Press, 1988).

Chibnall, M. '*The Debate on the Norman Conquest*' (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999).

Fowke, F.R. '*The Bayeux Tapestry. A History and Description*' (London: George Bell and Sons, 1898).

Gameson, R. '*The Study of the Bayeux tapestry*' (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 1999).

Huscroft, R. '*Ruling England, 1042-1217*' (Harlow: Pearson Longman, 2005).

Lewis, M.J. '*The Real World of the Bayeux Tapestry*'. (Stroud: The History Press, 2008),

Levey, S.M. and D. King. '*The Victoria and Albert Museum's Textile Collection. Embroidery in Britain 1200-1750*', (London: Victoria and Albert Museum, 1993).

McNulty, J.B. '*The Narrative Art of the Bayeux Tapestry Master*'. (AMS Press, 1999).

Morillo, S. '*The Battle of Hastings*'. (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 1996).

Musset, L. '*The Bayeux Tapestry*'. (Nantes: Artaud Freses, 1998).

Owen-Crocker, G.R, (ed), '*King Harold II and the Bayeux Tapestry*'. (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2005).

Pastan, E.C, White, S, D and Gilbert, K. '*The Bayeux Tapestry and its Contexts. A Reassessment*'. (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2014)

Shopkow, L. '*History and Community. Norman Historical Writing in the Elveneth and Twelfth Centuries*' (Washington D.C.: Catholic University Press of America Press, 1997).

Stenton, F (ed), '*The Bayeux Tapestry. A Comprehensive Survey*'. (London: The Phaidon Press, 1965).

Thorpe, L. '*The Bayeux Tapestry and the Norman Invasion*' (London: The Folio Society, 1973).

Walker, D. '*The Normans in Britain*' (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995)

Walker, I. W, *Harold the Last Anglo-Saxon King*. (Stroud: the History Press, 2010).

Williams, A. *The English and the Norman Conquest*' (Woodbridge: The Boydell press, 1995).