

## Commentary 2



*Fig 1. Scene 23 of the Bayeux Tapestry: Harold Swears an Oath to William*

## Introduction

The image depicts the then Earl of Wessex, Harold Godwinson swearing an oath to William, Duke of Normandy.<sup>1</sup> It is a key scene that records a significant moment in the events leading up to the Norman Conquest and is one on which the narrative told by the Bayeux Tapestry heavily depends.<sup>2</sup> Historically, the Tapestry was interpreted on face-value as being a neutral record of the events, both prior to and after the Battle of Hasting in 1066.<sup>3</sup> More recent scholarship holds it to be a carefully constructed example of Norman propaganda that was designed to legitimise William's claim to the English Throne by inferring that Harold committed perjury when he took the English Throne for himself.<sup>4</sup> The key purpose of the oath scene was to provide William with a justification, both legal and moral, for the Norman invasion of 1066, allowing him to be portrayed as the victim of Harold's betrayal and therefore able to frame the invasion as a just retribution, rather than a contestable attempt at succession.<sup>5</sup> This was achieved with the cunning use of ambiguity and religious symbolism that directed the viewer of the

<sup>1</sup> Richard Gameson, *The Study of the Bayeux Tapestry* (Boydell Press, 1997), p. 19.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid*, p. 19.

<sup>3</sup> Hilaire, Belloc, *The Book of the Bayeux Tapestry* (London: Methuen, 1914), pp. v-xviii.

<sup>4</sup> David Musgrove and Michael Lewis, *The Story of the Bayeux Tapestry: Unraveling the Norman Conquest* (Thames & Hudson, 2021), p. 264.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid*, p. 264.

Tapestry to arrive at an interpretation in which the Normans held the moral high ground with God on their side, rather than simply a chronology of events.

### **The Purpose and Context of the Tapestry**

The Bayeux Tapestry is commonly thought to have been created in the late eleventh century and have been commissioned by William the Conqueror's half-brother Bishop Odo of Bayeux, however, this point has been heavily debated by scholars.<sup>6</sup> It was created post William's victory at the Battle of Hastings in Oct 1066 and his subsequent crowning as King of England on Christmas Day of the same year.<sup>7</sup> It is undoubtedly a piece of Norman political ideology that portrays a version of events that supports Norman Rule and was intended to give the Norman elite a level of legitimacy to rule over England. As mentioned earlier, the oath scene (Scene 23) is one of the most important frames of the piece, but it is also the most contested.<sup>8</sup> It shows Harold to be swearing an oath on what appear to be relics, we are told this by the Latin inscription in this scene, 'VBI hAROLD SACRAMENTVM FECIT WILLELMO DVCI' (Where Harold swore a sacred oath to Duke William).<sup>9</sup> However, there is no information as to the content of the oath and for this reason it is highly ambiguous and open to interpretation. It is this very ambiguity that is used to justify William's claim to the English throne with viewers of the tapestry being led by the narrative to believe that it represented Harold pledging to support William's claim to the throne, an oath on which he was later said to renege.

### **A Visual Analysis of the Scene: Hierarchy, Gesture and Sacred Relics**

There are three key messages that can be read from the way in which the oath scene is constructed. The first is that of hierarchy, this is indicated by the positioning of both William and Harold. William is seated on a throne, the legs of which end in clawed animal-like feet. In his right hand, pointing upwards and resting over his right shoulder, he holds a sword and he is attired in a long dark robe which portrays him as an authoritative figure. He sits facing Harold at whom he is pointing with his left hand. Harold, identifiable by his Anglo-Saxon moustache, standing at the centre of the scene unarmed and wearing more modest clothes, appears to be subordinate to William.

The second message comes from the figures which are gesturing, and thus directing the viewer, towards the words of the inscription. Behind William are standing two male figures, one is armed with a shield and a sword that is pointing directly upwards to the word 'hAROLD' in the inscription at the top of the scene. The other is unarmed and

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<sup>6</sup> Martin K. Foys, Karen Eileen Overbey and Dan Terkla (eds), *The Bayeux Tapestry: New interpretations* (Boydell Press, 2009), pp. 1-14.

<sup>7</sup> David Bates, *William the Conqueror* (London, G. Philip, 1989), p.1.

<sup>8</sup> Mark Hagger, "The Making and Meaning of the Bayeux Tapestry Revisited," *Journal of Medieval History*, 50.2 (2024), pp. 214-35, doi:10.1080/03044181.2024.2324055, [Accessed online 12 April 2026]

<sup>9</sup> David Musgrove and Michael Lewis, *The Story of the Bayeux Tapestry*, p. 150.

pointing to the word 'SACRAMENTVM' in what could be interpreted as joining the two important words together.<sup>10</sup> Behind Harold there are two standing male figures, one of which also is pointing to the inscription. From their hairstyles and positioning, it can be assumed that the men standing behind William are Norman and that those behind Harold are Anglo-Saxon.<sup>11</sup> As men from both sides of the Norman Anglo-Saxon divide are pointing to the inscription it appears to support a narrative that both parties agree that this was the making of a sacred oath.

The third message comes from Harold and his interaction with two specific objects. He is shown with both of his arms outstretched to his sides. His hands are touching one object on either side of him which have been placed upon structures so that they are in line with the level of his hands. Both objects are caskets or reliquaries, highly decorated, which contain holy relics from Bayeux Cathedral.<sup>12</sup> The meaning and message of this scene rests on the very act of making an oath on sacred objects. The swearing of oaths on sacred relics carried a huge amount of spiritual weight in medieval political culture that incorporated divine witness and sanction. The fact that there were two relics intensifies the sacred nature of the oath making it not only a political agreement between Harold and William but also a spiritual agreement by Harold with God. The entire narrative of the Bayeux Tapestry and the legitimacy of William's conquest of 1066 rest on the fact that this event happened.

### **The Validity of the Oath: Coercion and Legality**

Whilst the scene in the Bayeux Tapestry shows Harold clearly touching the reliquaries there is evidence to suggest that the oath was made under duress circa 1064 with Norman and English sources conflicting on this point. William of Poitiers, in his *Gesta Guillelmi*, written between 1075 and 1077, states that Harold 'clearly and of his own free...', swore Fealty to William pledging that on the death of King Edward he, Harold, would ensure that the English monarchy would be pledged to William.<sup>13</sup> However, Eadmer of Canterbury, in his *Historia novorum in Anglia* (written 1109-1115), describes Harold as not having a choice, 'He could not see any way of escape without agreeing to all that William wished'.<sup>14</sup> Whether Harold, whilst under the control of William, made the oath under duress or not is a very important fact when deciding its validity. Under medieval law, an oath made under duress or coercion was invalid as it lacked binding authority and therefore could not be enforced. The Bayeux Tapestry is silent on the topic

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid, p. 150.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, p. 150.

<sup>12</sup> Elisabeth Van Houts, *Memory and Gender in Medieval Europe, 900-1200* (Springer, 2016), p. 124.

<sup>13</sup> William of Poitiers, *Gesta Guillelmi*, ed. and trans. R. H. C. Davis and Marjorie Chibnall (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), p. 71.

<sup>14</sup> Marc Morris, *The Norman Conquest: The Battle of Hastings and the Fall of Anglo-Saxon England* (Simon and Schuster, 2022), p.

of coercion; this is significant as negates any justification for Harold's subsequent actions.

## **Conclusion**

The oath scene could be interpreted a truthful record of events when viewed from the Norman perspective. However, this is not consistent with the narrative told by other sources, particularly the English sources. It is reasonable to conclude that the Bayeux Tapestry is about justifying Norman culture and the invasion of 1066, a political necessity as the Normans began their reign over England. The Bayeux Tapestry is an example of how visual culture can be used to create political legitimacy based on religious authority, which ultimately says more about how the Normans wished to be seen by others than being a true record of history.

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