

IDENTITY AND MYTH: THE NORMANS

HPHI 6009

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ASSESSMENT 1 - Portfolio Component one.

Commentary on scene from the Bayeux Tapestry: Harold Swears an oath to William.



**Pic 1. Scene 23 Bayeux Tapestry. "Ubi Harold Sacramentum Fecit Willelmo Ducci."
"Where Harold took an oath to Duke William."¹**

¹ Scene Number and translation of Latin text in L. Musset, *The Bayeux Tapestry*. (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2002) Translated by R. Hex. p. 147.

This commentary is based on scene 23 of the Bayeux Tapestry which depicts Harold Godwinson swearing on oath to William, Duke of Normandy and has been alternatively described as the tapestries stories first climax,² key scene of the tapestries narrative,³ and formal climax.⁴

Although referred to as a tapestry it is in fact an embroidery using woolen thread made up of nine uneven sections of linen cloth which is fifty centimetres wide and 64.38 m long and is missing material from the beginning and at the end.⁵ There is general agreement that the tapestry was produced in the eleventh century most probably in England.⁶ The embroidery narrative is divided into three bands with upper and lower decorative borders with a central band 33 cm wide that contains the main embroidered narrative. It consists of 58 scenes with an embroidered Latin text. The tapestry narrative deals with events around the Norman conquest of England and was first documented in 1476 when it is included in a list of textiles in Bayeux Cathedral which described it as:

"Item, a very long and narrow textile, that is embroidered with images and inscriptions that show the Conquest of England, which is hung around the nave of a church the day and octave of the Feast of Relics".⁷

Scene 23 depicts Duke William sitting on a throne and holding his sword with a guard and a spear man standing behind him on the left hand side of the scene and is set in a Ducal residence⁸. In the centre of the image, Harold is depicted looking at and touching a reliquary with his right hand while his left hand is placed on top of another reliquary to his left. Both reliquaries are ornately depicted and hung with cloths with blind arches which were a typical decorative motif used for depictions of reliquaries⁹. On the left hand side of the scene are two further spearmen. It is noted that both William and the guard standing behind him are depicted arms outstretched pointing towards Harold in the centre of the scene, while a spearman on the right hand side is also depicted pointing to Harold in the centre with a bent arm. This can be seen to direct the viewer's attention to Harold in the centre touching the two reliquaries which is the important substance of the scene. This highlights how the composer of the tapestry uses the imagery to help navigate and direct the viewer through the tapestries narrative and concentrate the viewers attention at key moments. There is embroidered latin script above the top of the

² F. Stenton (ed), *'The Bayeux Tapestry. A Comprehensive Survey'*. (London: The Phaidon Press, 1965). p. 179.

³ Musset, *'The Bayeux Tapestry'*, p. 146.

⁴ R. Huscroft, *'The Norman Conquest. A new Introduction'*. (Harlow: Pearson Education Ltd, 2009). p. 13.

⁵ Musset, *'The Bayeux Tapestry'*. p.18.

⁶ Ibid. p.16 and 17.

⁷ E.C. Pastan, S.D. White, and K. Gilbert, *'The Bayeux Tapestry and its Contexts. A reassessment'*. (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2014). p. 73.

⁸ The preceding scene depicts a building on top of a steep motte accessed by a stairway and has embroidered latin script saying "HIE (SIC) WILLELM VENIT BAGIAS - (Here William came to Bayeux). It is noted that Bayeux is named "Bagias" which is an anglicised spelling of Bayeux and helps support the English origins of the tapestry rather than in Normandy or elsewhere.

⁹ Musset, *'The Bayeux Tapestry'*, p. 146.

scene; “UBI HAROLD SCARAMENTUM FECIT WILLELMO DUCI” (Where Harold took an oath to Duke William).

The uniqueness of the tapestry, its lack of provenance until it is first recorded in 1476¹⁰, the subject matter of the tapestry being about a transformation event in British and European history and uncertainty about fundamental questions concerning the tapestry's origins: its commission, production, and use, has meant that the tapestry has been subject of a rich and continuing academic debate. Brown recorded in *The Bayeux Tapestry: history and bibliography a total of 587 books and articles published up to 1987*¹¹. It has been stated that the tapestry is “quite literally a work of art that is without a context”¹² as there are few medieval textiles to use as a comparison. However, perhaps its uniqueness lies fundamentally in its survivability.

In a panegyric entitled *Adelae Comitissae* to Adela of Blois, who was a daughter of William the Conqueror, Baudi de Bourgeuil's describes a tapestry in her bedchamber depicting the Norman Conquest. Baudi comments on the figures looking real and alive and that:

“letters pointed out the events and each of the figures in such a way that whoever sees them can read them, if he knows how.”¹³

Baudi's comments provide evidence of a textile with similarities to the Bayeux Tapestry but importantly needed a degree of understanding to be read. This hints at depicted images having multiple or layered meanings only accessible to those who had the ability to understand. Neagley points out that the way in which a modern viewer experiences and understands visual images is different from a viewer in the eleventh century and there being an “experiential gap” in relation to a modern and eleventh century viewer.¹⁴ This adds an additional level of complexity in seeking interpretations.

Richardson¹⁵ and others have written of the myth of the Normans while Pastan has commented on the “weight of interpretation” placed on scholars seeking alternative interpretations.¹⁶ It can be argued that there is also a myth around the tapestry and Scene 23 in particular that can be seen to encapsulate competing and overlapping myths around Norman and English identities which has ongoing historical resonances. White has commented on the selectivity and presuppositions of historians when interpreting the tapestry and how the Tapestry has been interpreted totally differently by historians such as Freeman, Stenton and Bouet.¹⁷

¹⁰ Musset, 'The Bayeux Tapestry,' p. 14.

¹¹ S.A. Brown, *The Bayeux Tapestry: History and Bibliography*. (Woodbridge, Boydell, 1988).

¹² E.C. Pastan, in E.C. Pastan, S.D. White and K.Gilbert, 'The Bayeux Tapestry and its Contexts. A Reassessment' (Woodbridge: Boydell Press 2014).

¹³ Baudi de Bourgeuil in S. A. Brown, in 'The Bayeux Tapestry: New Approaches'. (Oxbow Books, 2011)

¹⁴ Neagley, L. E. in Lewis, M.J, Owen-Crocker, G.R and Terla, D (Eds). *The Bayeux Tapestry. New Approaches*. (Oxbow Books. 2011). p. 136.

¹⁵ R.H.C. Davis, 'Normans and their Myth'. (London:Thames and Hudson, 1976).

¹⁶ Pastan, 'The Bayeux Tapestry and its Contexts. A Reassessment.'

¹⁷ White, S.D in 'The Bayeux Tapestry and its Contexts: A Reassessment'.

As per Baudi, Scene 23 can be interpreted to have layered meanings. It can be viewed as a clear warning to those who saw it of the dangers and consequences of breaking oaths and the spiritual power of the saints and relics. It can be argued that this was the main purpose of the tapestry. All the scenes prior to the oath act as a prelude to scene 23 and all the scenes after this are a direct result of Harold breaking his oath to William. It pictorially demonstrated what happened “to those who failed to appreciate the sanctity of oaths”.¹⁸ This interpretation fits with use at Bayeux Cathedral in an annual ceremony at the Feast of Relics. It can also be seen to evidence the important role and practice that swearing oaths on relics played in the eleventh century.¹⁹

However, its other key message arguably was to portray a key part of William’s claim to the English throne. This was based on William having a rightful claim and Harold becoming a vassal of William after swearing a solemn oath on relics that he would support William’s claim. In the image William is on his throne with Harold in a clear subservient position. Harold’s oath can be seen to become a key subject of Norman propaganda in subsequent Norman biographies and histories. This can be seen to be aimed to undermine the legitimacy of Harold’s kingship.²⁰ William of Poitiers who was a chaplain to Duke William referred to Harold as being insane and seizing the English throne “thereby perjuring himself²¹ and can be viewed as putting forward an “official Norman case for the conquest”.²² William of Jumieges referred to Harold as “perjured in the fealty which he had sworn to the duke”.²³

Scene 23 along with the subsequent Norman histories can also be viewed as illustrating Williams’ need to justify and bolster his position as he had a weak claim to the throne. Scene 23 can be viewed as a powerful pictorial statement of legitimacy. William of Poitiers states that prior to the invasion William sent envoys across Europe to state his case and garner support for his proposed invasion and that Henry IV the Holy Roman Emperor, King Swein of Sweden and Pope Alexander II supported William; with the pope giving William a papal banner.²⁴ Whether this was actually the case is open to question. Henry IV was a minor, King Swein is more likely to have supported Harold’s claim²⁵. In relation to Alexander II it is noticeable that William of Jumieges makes no mention of this. As in other aspects of the tapestry, whether it shows a papal banner is open to debate as is whether the scene 23 really happened or not. However in viewing scene 23 and the tapestry as a whole it can be argued that it is not the reality but the perception of what happened or could have happened that is the real meaning of scene 23 and the tapestry as a whole.

¹⁸ Huscroft, ‘*The Norman Conquest: A New Introduction*’, p. 13.

¹⁹ R. Bartlett, ‘*Why Can the Dead Do Such Great Things. Saints and Worshipers from the Martyrs to the Reformation*’. (Princeton University Press, 2015).

²⁰ G.R. Owen- Crocker, ‘*King Harold II and the Bayeux Tapestry*’ (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2005). p. 19.

²¹ Ibid. p.19.

²² M.Chibnall, ‘*The Debate on the Norman Conquest*’. (Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1999). p. 9.

²³ William of Jumieges, in Owen- Crocker, ‘*King Harold II and the Bayeux Tapestry*’. p.19.

²⁴ Huscroft, ‘*The Norman Conquest: A New Introduction*’, p. 121.

²⁵ Ibid

Due to the tapestry's uniqueness, importance and its uncertainties it will continue to provoke a rich ongoing academic discourse and I agree that there is “always something fresh to learn by studying the tapestry.”²⁶

²⁶ L.D. Legge, ‘Bishop Odo in the Bayeux Tapestry’. *Medium Aevum*. 1987, Vol.56, No.1 (1987). p. 85.

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