

1

The Bayeux Tapestry: History or Propaganda?

Shirley A. Brown

The so-called Bayeux Tapestry is actually an embroidery of wool on linen, measuring 231 feet long and nineteen and a half inches high.¹ The Tapestry first came to public attention around 1730 when drawings of its two fragments were published,² but it was its first

¹ There are a number of complete illustrations of the Bayeux Tapestry, the most conveniently available being found in Frank Stenton, et al., *The Bayeux Tapestry: A Comprehensive Survey*, 2nd ed. (London, 1965); and in Simone Bertrand, *La Tapisserie de Bayeux et la manière de vivre au onzième siècle* (La Pierre-qui-Vire, 1966). The Tapestry was deposited in the former Bishop's Palace across from the Cathedral of Notre-Dame in Bayeux in 1913; it has recently been restored and placed in new quarters. For a physical history of the Tapestry, see Simone Bertrand, "The History of the Tapestry," in Stenton, *Bayeux Tapestry*, 88-97.

² Antoine Lancelot, "Explication d'un monument de Guillaume le Conquérant," *Memoires de littérature tirés des registres de l'Académie royale des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres depuis l'année MDCCXVIII jusques et compris l'année MDCCXXV* 6 (1729), 739-55. Also, Bernard de Montfaucon, "Monument d'Harold," *Les monuments de la monarchie française* (Paris, 1729-33), Vol. 1, 371-79, and Vol. 2, 1-32. Also, Lancelot, "Suite de l'explication d'un monument de Guillaume le Conquérant," *Memoires de littérature tirés des registres de l'Académie royale des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres depuis l'année MDCCXXVI jusques et compris l'année MDCCXXX* 8 (1732), 602-68.

exhibition in the Louvre in 1803 which sparked widespread speculation about the Tapestry's use, dating, and interpretation.³

Not the least of the problems provided by the Tapestry is the understanding and interpretation of the narrative it presents, and the assessing of its value as a historical document. Because it tells a tale of the events leading up to, and culminating in, the Battle of Hastings of October 1066, an expedition which dramatically altered the course of history in both England and France, a prodigious amount of partisan scholarship has resulted. For many historians, the Bayeux Tapestry is an almost contemporary, and therefore reliable, source of historical information for the years between 1064 and 1066.⁴ The weight of art historical evidence which points to an origin of the Tapestry in the latter part of the eleventh century⁵ would seem to corroborate this view. As a result, the embroidery has been used to both prove and disprove speculations about actual occurrences and about the relationship between Harold Godwinson and William of Normandy. The tenacity with which historians have retained their reliance on the embroidery as a historical document persists to this day in spite of warnings that the Tapestry's account of events cannot be taken at face value as history.⁶

The detailed recording of events which produce such drastic political and dynastic changes is more commonly found in poetry and historical prose than in the visual arts of the Middle Ages, and the suggestion that the Bayeux Tapestry was meant primarily as a "historical document" must be investigated with care. The Norman Conquest is well documented for an event of the eleventh century, but its several

descriptions are often at variance with each other, and at first estimate, they seem far from satisfactory. As a rule, medieval works of history and biography must be understood as interpretations of events and people which reflect the purpose for which the literary work was intended. Often, the laudatory or critical motivations behind these "historical" accounts are apparent, and in some instances, they clearly overrule accuracy. To suggest that if an event described in one of the contemporary written accounts also appears in the Bayeux Tapestry, then it must have happened as so described, is risky business indeed. As we shall see, there are some very interesting idiosyncrasies in the Tapestry's narrative which lead me to suggest that historical accuracy was definitely not the main purpose of the Bayeux Tapestry.

The first half of the Tapestry presents a visual narrative of the events leading up to the Norman takeover of England. The Tapestry apparently relates how King Edward sent Harold Godwinson on a mission to Normandy, presumably to renew the pledge of the English crown to Duke William.⁷ But we are also reminded of the possibility that Harold set out to secure the release of his two kinsmen who were being held as peace security in Normandy.⁸ Harold, landing in Ponthieu by error or chance, was taken prisoner by Count Guy; he was quickly rescued on William's orders and taken to the ducal palace at Rouen. We then see Harold accompanying William on a successful expedition against Conan of Brittany, for which the Anglo-Saxon Earl receives arms and armour from the Norman Duke. Afterwards, they journey to Bayeux where Harold swears his famous oath to support William's claims to the English throne. Harold returns to England where King Edward soon dies and is buried in the newly-completed Westminster Abbey. The English thegns offer Harold the crown, and he is installed by Stigand, Archbishop of Canterbury.

At this point, almost half the Tapestry has been surveyed, and a somewhat confused series of events has been given a prominence far beyond its apparent deserts. The next section of the Tapestry shows in detail some of the elaborate preparations of the Norman fleet. The sea-passage to Pevensey is uneventful, and much following space is given to the establishment of a camp at Hastings. Finally, the last third of the Tapestry depicts the actual Battle of Hastings. Some specific events of the day are shown: William exhorts his knights to fight bravely but wisely; Leofwine and Gyrth Godwinson are killed; the Norman rout is turned back by Bishop Odo, William, and Eustace of Boulogne; the Norman rally results in Harold's death, and the English

7 This motive is not explicit in the written captions which accompany the illustrations. The reasons for the expedition are left obscure, perhaps because they were apparent to the viewer of the time. The interpretation given above follows the usual explanation of the Norman historians.

8 Wissolik, "Saxon Statement," 69-97.

3 For a bibliography of the Tapestry, see Alphonse J. J. Marquet de Vasselot and Roger A. Weigert, *Bibliographie de la Tapisserie, des tapis et de la broderie en France* (Paris, 1935), 298-309; and Otto K. Werckmeister, "The Political Ideology of the Bayeux Tapestry," *Studi Medievali*, 3rd ser., 17 (2) (1976), 589-95. I have compiled a more complete and up-to-date bibliography, which should soon be available.

4 David C. Douglas and George W. Greenaway, *English Historical Documents 1042-1189*, EHD II, 1st ed. (New York, 1953), 217: "It provides, together with the Bayeux Tapestry . . . , the best contemporary description of the Battle of Hastings," and "The only strictly reliable evidence for the journey [of Harold] and the famous oath is contained in the narrative [of William of Poitiers] and in the Bayeux Tapestry." Also, Richard D. Wissolik, "The Saxon Statement: Code in the Bayeux Tapestry," *Annale Mediaevale* 19 (1979), 69-97, a very interesting article which seeks to link the Bayeux Tapestry with Eadmer's *Historia Novorum in Anglia* as historical sources for 1064-66. For a cautionary response, see Nicholas P. Brooks and H. E. Walker, "The Authority and Interpretation of the Bayeux Tapestry," *Proceedings of the Battle Conference—1978* (Ipswich, 1979), 34.

5 Francis Wormald, "Style and Design," in Stenton, *Bayeux Tapestry*, 24-36; and Brooks and Walker, "Authority," 13-19.

6 Stenton, "The Historical Background," in Stenton, *Bayeux Tapestry*, 9; and Werckmeister, "Political Ideology," 589: "Thus, the Bayeux Tapestry appears not only questionable as a historical source in the way all contemporary sources lack objectivity, a point that has long been recognized. It appears as a piece of political ideology, made up to serve the interests of a person and his social group."

flee. The Tapestry ends abruptly at that point, and we have no indication of how much longer it initially was.

At first, it seems odd that the Battle of Hastings is given such relatively cursory coverage in the Tapestry's narrative, and that the preliminary events merit such detailed telling. It has been suggested that the main purpose of the Tapestry's narrative was to uphold established Norman propaganda, which emphasized William's "lawful" claim to the English throne, based upon Edward's designation and Harold's oath.⁹ Thus the first half of the Tapestry established both the legal and moral cause of the Invasion as more important than the fighting itself.¹⁰ In both cases, the war is treated as a "just war," and its atrocities must be downplayed.

But the question still remains: was the Tapestry's goal merely to repeat what had already been established by the history-makers, or was its narrative meant to be more complex than that? Was the originator consciously referring to several different sources for his information, and were deliberate parallels being drawn with other art or literary forms?

With these considerations in mind, it seems reasonable to compare the Tapestry's version of events with the written accounts of the Norman Invasion which were in existence before, or contemporary with, the proposed production date of the embroidery, and thus possibly known by the person who undertook the commission for the Tapestry. For various reasons, I place the Tapestry's creation in the 1080's.¹¹ This eliminates Eadmer, Ordericus Vitalis, Robert Wace, and William of Malmesbury as direct sources for the Tapestry, although the last three have often been cited in studies of the work. However, these later versions of the Conquest story, which augment the existing eleventh-century accounts, raise the possibility of lost sources and an oral tradition to which the originator of the Tapestry's narrative might have had access.¹²

9 This interpretation, which differs somewhat from the "pure history" suggestion, rightly indicates the propagandistic aspects of many medieval historical writings, whose purpose it was to justify the expansionist tendencies of ambitious rulers such as the Normans.

10 The development of the "moral cause" viewpoint is undertaken by Charles R. Dowdell in "The Bayeux Tapestry and the French Secular Epic," *Burlington Magazine* 108 (1966), 549-60.

11 The date usually suggested by those who feel the Tapestry was meant as a cathedral decoration is before the consecration of Bayeux Cathedral in 1077. Werckmeister, "Political Ideology," 581-89, has suggested it was made between 1082 and 1087. My arguments for the later dating, arrived at independently, are based on the relationship between the Tapestry, Odo of Bayeux, and the *Carmen de Hastingae Proelio*, and will appear in a forthcoming publication.

12 This suggestion must be entertained at least for those places where existing sources are lacking, but must not be used as a necessary substitute for artistic invention. Later accounts of the events might well be using the Bayeux Tapestry's narrative as evidence and not be relying on either a lost source or "inside information."

Principal among the works which were written in the direct context of the Norman Invasion of England, and which still exist, are: the entries in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*;¹³ the *Vita Edwardi Regis*, written in England in 1065-67 on the orders of Queen Edith;¹⁴ the *Carmen de Hastingae Proelio*, a verse description of the Battle of Hastings, probably written in 1067;¹⁵ and the accounts of William of Jumièges of ca. 1071,¹⁶ and William of Poitiers, written between 1071 and 1077.¹⁷

It has been acknowledged by almost all writers on the Bayeux Tapestry that the narrative it constructs has many correspondences

13 *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, trans. by George N. Garmonsway, 2nd ed. (London, 1954).

14 *Vita Edwardi Regis qui apud Westmonasterium requiescat*, ed. and trans. by Frank Barlow (London, 1962). The *Vita* now exists in one manuscript, BL MS Harley 526, of ca. 1100. It exhibits the hands of that time from Christ Church, Canterbury. Apparently there was a copy at Westminster by 1085, but it does not seem to have been the same manuscript. The extant copy may very well have come from the autograph. See *Vita Edwardi*, lxxix-lxxxii.

15 *The Carmen de Hastingae Proelio of Guy, Bishop of Amiens*, ed. and trans. by Catherine Morton and Hope Muntz, Oxford Medieval Texts (Oxford, 1972). The *Carmen* is preserved in one manuscript, Bibliothèque Royale de Belgique no. 10615-729, written ca. 1100. It apparently was not copied from the autograph but from an intermediate version. Scholars speculate that the original may have been deposited in a monastery in Liège, or at Saint-Bertin in Saint-Omer, or even at Saint-Riquier. It could easily have been available at one of the teaching centres in northern France to which young clerics were sent for training. It is furthermore notable that Guy of Amiens accompanied Queen Mathilde to England in 1068 for her coronation, so that the poem may very well have been circulated among the royal entourage. See *Carmen*, lix-lxiii. More recently, Ralph H. C. Davis, in "The *Carmen de Hastingae Proelio*," *EHR* 93 (1978), 241-61, argues for a twelfth-century dating. See also Ralph H. C. Davis, L. J. Engels, et al., "The *Carmen de Hastingae Proelio*: A Discussion," *Proceedings of the Battle Conference on Anglo-Norman Studies II—1979* (Ipswich, 1980), 1-20.

16 William of Jumièges (= Gulielmus Gemeticensis), *Gesta Normannorum Ducum*, ed. by Jean Marx, Société de l'Histoire de Normandie (Rouen and Paris, 1914). For a translation of the pertinent section see EHD II, 228-30, No. 3. The story of the Norman Conquest of England is a small part of the history of the Norman Dukes. This tract was exceedingly popular and was copied and revised many times. The autograph is lost, but the work exists now in no fewer than twenty-six pre-fifteenth-century manuscripts, of six different versions. It was revised in the twelfth century by writers as disparate as Ordericus Vitalis, Robert de Torigny, and a monk from Caen. Its wide circulation could easily have made it popular in both Norman England and on the Continent during the late eleventh century. See *Gesta Normannorum Ducum*, xxix-xliii. This work is referred to as William of Jumièges in this essay to distinguish it from William of Poitiers's history.

17 William of Poitiers's *Gesta Guillelmi ducis Normannorum et regis Anglorum* has been edited under the title *Histoire de Guillaume le Conquérant*, ed. and trans. by Raymonde Foreville (Paris, 1952). The earliest and only manuscript containing the *Gesta Guillelmi* is an early seventeenth-century copy by André du Chesne of an exemplar from the collection of Robert Cotton. The Cotton manuscript, which may very well have been the autograph, has disappeared, and quite possibly was destroyed in the disastrous fire which decimated Cotton's library. See *Gesta Guillelmi*, l-liii. For dating, see also Davis, "Carmen," 245 n. 2, where he indicates 1077 as the closest possible date for the writing of this history. William of Poitiers's work will be referred to as either the *Gesta* or the *Gesta Guillelmi* in this essay; all references will be to the edition by Foreville.

with the pertinent sections of the *Gesta Guillelmi* of William of Poitiers. It is true that, at first study, the Tapestry's story seems to follow established Norman propaganda which emphasized William's rightful claim to the English throne. William of Poitiers was chaplain to the Norman duke, and his account of the deeds of the duke-king may quickly have become "official" history. But there is still argument as to whether this means that the Tapestry's narrative designer knew and used the *Gesta* as a source for his story, or whether they both came from a common background of knowledge.¹⁸ For our purposes, we can leave that aspect of the problem aside.

There are many instances of apparent borrowing from the *Gesta Guillelmi* found in the Tapestry's story: the inclusion of Harold's journey to Normandy as Edward's emissary, the Breton campaign against Conan in which Harold participated, the importance attached to Harold's oath-taking, Harold's coronation with Stigand as celebrant, the dispatching of English spies to Normandy after the crowning, the messenger sent to William at Hastings by Rodbert fitzWimarch, and William personally delivering the pre-battle harangue to his troops. Let us look at these correspondences more closely.

The extant contemporary English sources make no mention of a journey to Normandy undertaken by Harold, nor of the designation of William of Normandy as Edward's heir. William of Poitiers (I.41) states that King Edward, feeling he was soon to die, sent Harold to Normandy to reaffirm his designation of William as heir to his throne. He chose Harold because of his riches and power, and also because he believed that an alliance between William and Harold might avert English opposition to the choice. This basic idea is also found in William of Jumièges (VII.13) and the *Carmen de Hastingae Proelio* (vv. 287-96); the latter is probably the earliest reference we have to Harold's journey to Normandy. Although there is no specific indication of the reasons for Harold's journey shown in the Tapestry, it has generally been assumed that the narrative is following the Norman explanation, and this would appear to be supported by the rest of the tale.

One must also seriously consider the more recent suggestion that there is an underlying theme in the depiction of Harold's journey: Eadmer (I.6-7) later wrote that Harold had set out to rescue two kinsmen who were being held as hostages by William.¹⁹ But the additional idea that an Anglo-Saxon code or viewpoint was sneaked into the Tapestry's narrative, beyond the comprehension of its presumably Norman patrons,²⁰ I find unnecessary. If the Tapestry's story was not meant to be unmitigated Norman propaganda, then the addition of the

secondary plot, the hostage story, found in the Anglo-Saxon accounts, becomes less awkward. It need not necessarily be at odds with the Tapestry's generally Norman character.

Only the Tapestry indicates Bosham specifically as the port from which Harold and his retinue sailed. Bosham commanded the harbour of Chichester and was one of the more important sailing ports on the Channel. It was a rich area, and in 1064 Harold owned the manor as well as the manor church, which is probably indicated in the Tapestry. During the 1050's, Harold's father, Earl Godwin, had acquired the manor and church, reportedly by unscrupulous means and trickery; it was from Bosham that he and his family fled when they were driven into exile by Edward. It was at the end of this exile that the two hostages, Wulfnoth and Hakon, were sent to Normandy. Are we to find an allusion to the hostages in the inclusion of Bosham? Perhaps, but it is equally likely that we have here a moral hint, in the inclusion of Harold's devotions at Bosham, of his perfidious nature and the hypocrisy of his faith. His father had rebelled against King Edward and then taken what was not rightly his, namely the Bosham estate, and the son was to continue the family tradition, and seize the English crown.

The episode between Harold and Guy of Ponthieu is found only in William of Jumièges and William of Poitiers; the Tapestry seems to follow the latter's story closely. The *Gesta* (I.41) relates how Harold was rescued from that barbaric group by threats and money and delivered by Guy personally to William at the border castle of Eu; William then brought Harold to his chief city, Rouen, where he lavished great hospitality on him, for he was pleased to have such an illustrious mediator with the English. The Tapestry follows this story rather closely, without mentioning specific locations, either Eu or Rouen, but it is assumed that the designation of the arcaded building as "palatium suum" is a reference to the ducal palace at Rouen.

William of Poitiers (I.44-45) and the Bayeux Tapestry are the only two extant sources that give information about the clash between Duke William and Conan of Brittany, but they differ substantially in their versions of the events. According to the *Gesta Guillelmi*, William undertook a campaign into Brittany to relieve Riwallon, Lord of Dol, who was under siege by Conan, the dissident Count of Brittany, who refused to give allegiance to his rightful lord, William. There is agreement between the embroidery and the *Gesta* that Harold and his retinue accompanied the Normans into Brittany. Harold's heroism in rescuing the Norman soldiers from the sand at the treacherous crossing of the Couesnon near Mont-Saint-Michel is attested to only in the Tapestry.

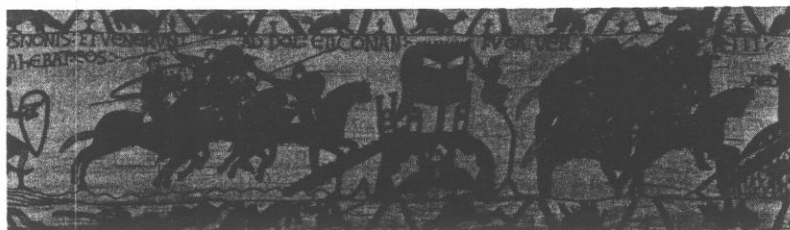
When the Norman knights, strangely without armour, arrive at the besieged town of Dol, Conan is seen, in the Tapestry, sliding down a

18 For the latest opinion on this problem, see Brooks and Walker, "Authority," 5 and n. 17.

19 Wissolik, "Saxon Statement," 69-97.

20 Wissolik, "Saxon Statement," 71-72.

rope from the fortifications and escaping. According to William of Poitiers, Conan was outside the town, and not within, when the Normans arrived; he fled into the countryside with William in pursuit. The embroidery shows the Normans riding past Rennes with its motte-and-bailey castle, and finally catching up with the Bretons at Dinan, which is attacked by fully-armoured knights, and its palisade burned. Conan is forced by the odds to surrender the town's keys. This finale to the expedition is at complete variance with William of Poitiers, who claims that Conan, having met with Geoffrey of Anjou, fled beyond William's reach, and a pitched battle never occurred. (See plates 1 and 2.)



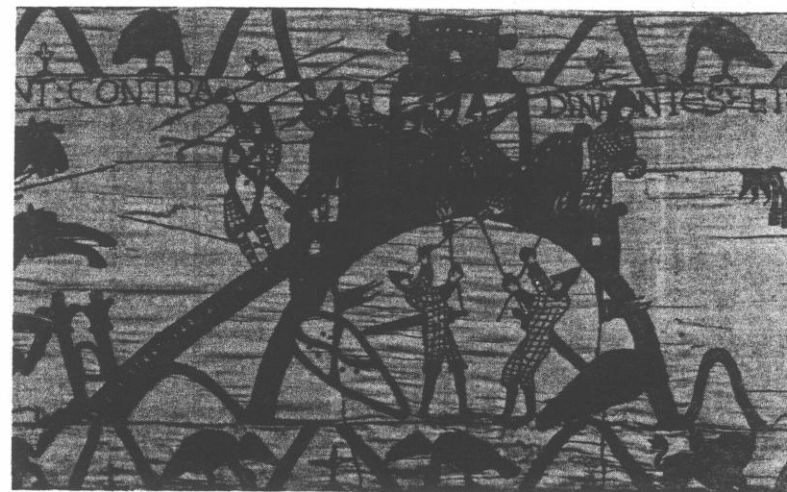
— Special permission of the Bibliothèque Municipale, Bayeux

Plate 1. The Normans attack Dol and Conan flees.

The Bayeux Tapestry's version of these events obviously serves to render William greater glory than does the literary account. But which account gives us the clues as to what "really happened"? If the Tapestry were meant to indicate actual events, how do we explain the inconsistency with William of Poitiers? Surely if William the Conqueror had been ultimately successful in defeating Conan in battle, this would have appeared as such in the *Gesta*, written during the 1070's, and within the court circle itself. The subjugation of Conan, as shown in the Tapestry, on the other hand, furnishes the viewers with a good example of how Duke William could easily subdue a rebellious vassal, and was perhaps a warning to future errant subjects, and a foretaste of what was to happen to Harold. As such, it is more essential to the Tapestry's story than to history.

William of Poitiers mentions only one settlement by name, Dol, where Riwallon was ensconced. The Tapestry furnishes the route of the chase by adding Mont-Saint-Michel, Rennes, and Dinan to the list of place-names. Mont-Saint-Michel was a very popular pilgrimage spot in Normandy and was under ducal patronage; it was from this monastery that the monks came to settle in the Abbey of Saint-Vigor which Bishop Odo of Bayeux founded just outside his episcopal city. The

inclusion of the island sanctuary in the Tapestry is probably a reference to both popular piety and to a patron.



— Special permission of the Bibliothèque Municipale, Bayeux

Plate 2. Conan surrenders the keys of Dinan.

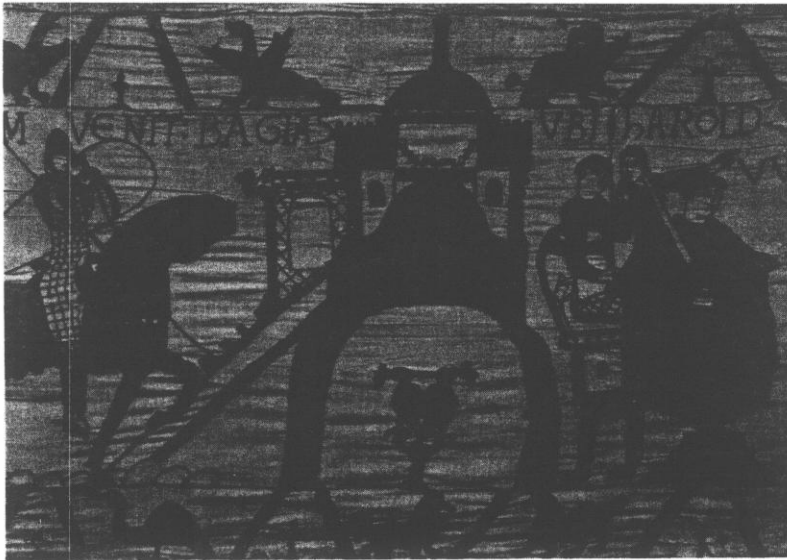
The next sequence of events depicted in the Tapestry—Breton campaign, bestowal of arms,²¹ and oath-taking—are all mentioned fully by William of Poitiers (I.42), but interestingly enough, in reverse order. The Tapestry order allows the oath-taking to become the culmination of Harold's stay in Normandy, and it is the last thing he does before he sails back to England. It provides the first real climax of events in the embroidery's narrative and is a turning point in the tale.

Several times, the *Carmen de Hastingae Proelio* (vv. 233-34; 239-40; 297-300) mentions a pact of allegiance between Harold and William, but the oaths are never explained and each time Guy of Amiens indicates that the agreement between the two leaders was private. William of Poitiers is the first source to give specific details about the oaths²² which he also indicates as taking place at Bonneville-sur-

21 Werckmeister, "Political Ideology," 563-79, forwards a lengthy and legalistic interpretation of the arms-giving scene as an indication of the legal relationship between Harold and William. The complex exposition of political ideology seems out of character with the Bayeux Tapestry's narrative, which I prefer to see as more straightforward.

22 Only the *Gesta* details the overtly preposterous terms of the oath, which are all to the Norman's benefit: Harold would represent William in Edward's court and do all he

Touques. The Tapestry places the ceremony at Bayeux, presumably out of deference to Bishop Odo, the probable patron of the Tapestry,²³ but this still leaves us with the necessity of deciding which source is most "reliable." The oath-taking is shown in the Tapestry as a formal ceremony rather than a private agreement. William presides, seated, holding his sword of office erect while Harold swears his oath upon two objects, which are either portable altars or reliquaries. This indication of formality gives greater importance to the action and increases the inevitability of the consequences when the oath is broken. (See plates 3 and 4.)



— Special permission of the Bibliothèque Municipale, Bayeux

Plate 3. The Normans and Harold come to Bayeux.

could to ensure William's accession; and he would place and support garrisons in castles about England for William's use, especially at Dover, at his own expense. In return, William confirmed Harold in all the lands he currently held in England, with all his dignities. It is then stated that Harold swore to these terms freely, after having paid ceremonial homage to the Duke and having become his vassal.

23 Odo's patronage has long been accepted as probable on the grounds of the emphasis given in the Tapestry's narrative to his important contribution to the Norman victory, and because of the reference to Bayeux in the oath scene. Odo's patronage will be dealt with in my forthcoming publication.



— Special permission of the Bibliothèque Municipale, Bayeux
Plate 4. Harold's oath.

The Norman sources, William of Jumièges (VII.13) and William of Poitiers (II.1), state that Harold, supported by English "partisans," immediately upon King Edward's death seized the throne, and that he was crowned with undue haste on the same day as the funeral. The Tapestry seems to follow closely the *Gesta's* description. The two men who offer Harold the crown while pointing back to the deathbed scene have been interpreted as representing the Witan.²⁴ However, there would have been little time for an election to take place between Edward's death and the coronation if it were held the same day as the funeral. They may perhaps be better seen as the English "partisans" who upheld Harold's claim to the throne. Supporting this interpretation is the deliberate presence of Archbishop Stigand at the coronation, which agrees with the *Gesta*. Later English sources, such as Florence of Worcester, Ingulph of Croyland, and the Anonymous Chronicler of York, state that Harold was crowned by Ældred of York, obviously to circumvent the difficulties of Stigand's irregular succession.²⁵ Existing English sources contemporary with the event do not specify which prelate presided at the ceremony. The scenes here appear to correspond with Norman ideology, as outlined by William of Poitiers, with

24 Charles H. Gibbs-Smith, *The Bayeux Tapestry* (London, 1973), fig. 26.

25 Stigand, a close associate of Earl Godwin, Harold's father, became Archbishop of Canterbury in 1052, after Robert of Jumièges was driven out of England. He was repeatedly excommunicated by a series of popes before and after receiving the pallium from Benedict X in 1058, and finally removed in 1070 when Lanfranc was given the position.

the purpose, not of denying that Harold was an anointed king, but of showing that his status was iniquitous. (See plates 5 and 6.)



— Special permission of the Bibliothèque Municipale, Bayeux

Plate 5. The death of King Edward.



— Special permission of the Bibliothèque Municipale, Bayeux

Plate 6. The crowning of Harold as King of England.

As mentioned earlier, the first half of the Tapestry sets up the moral cause for the Norman takeover of England. William had been designated as heir to the throne and had received oaths of support from Harold Godwinson, the most powerful of the English nobles. When

Harold defies his freely-given oath and is crowned King of England by a usurper Archbishop of Canterbury, the course of history is set. William must invade England to secure what is rightly his! With this statement clearly made, the emphasis in the Tapestry's narrative turns to a reaffirmation of the important personal role played in the sequence of events by William's half-brother, Odo of Bayeux. The attention given Odo would seem to indicate that he had more than a passing interest in the production of the Tapestry.

The second half of the Tapestry's story appears to be similar to accounts other than William of Poitiers's *Gesta*, but there are still a few scenes where a careful reading of this history would seem to help us understand what is being represented in the Tapestry.

Immediately following the coronation and comet tableau, a man is shown speaking to Harold. It has been assumed that this conversation is connected with the preceding comet scene, and that this omen is the subject of the discussion, with the future invasion foretold by the ghostly ships in the border beneath.²⁶ But it would make better sense if this episode and the sailing to Normandy in the next scene were viewed as a sequence. William of Jumièges (VII.13) tells us that Duke William sent a messenger to Harold after the coronation, urging him to honour the Norman claim to the throne of England. William of Poitiers (II.41) on the other hand, relates how Harold sent spies to Normandy and that one of them was captured and brought before William. The man speaking to Harold may very well be the messenger sent to Harold by William, who, according to William of Jumièges, threatens invasion if the crown is not relinquished. The more likely possibility is that this is a member of the English spying team, receiving last minute instructions before heading off to the Continent. The adjacent scene shows a ship landing in Normandy, and this is almost certainly the ship delivering the spy. Since there is no greeting party at the landing, it probably is not the return of the Norman messenger, and it is distinctly labelled as an English ship.²⁷

After the landing at Pevensey and the hurried construction of a fortified camp at Hastings, the Tapestry shows how news is brought to William about Harold. Both the *Carmen de Hastingae Proelio* (vv. 195-276) and the *Gesta* (II.10-12) indicate that there was an exchange of clerical envoys by the two sides; but the messenger in the

26 Dodwell, "Bayeux Tapestry," 559.

27 The fact that the man speaking to Harold wears the "Anglo-Saxon" haircut while the man wading with the boat's anchor sports the shaved nape of the "Norman" style should not be emphasized. The haircut distinction in the Tapestry breaks down by this point, and it is misleading to allow it to determine interpretation. Notice the very next scene where the order to build ships is given by a Duke William with a full head of "Anglo-Saxon" hair! It is only the clerical haircut which seems to be consistent in its use.

Tapestry does not appear to be a monk. The depiction here is probably based on William of Poitiers, who further states that first there arrived at Hastings a messenger from a Norman living in England, named Rodbert (presumably Rodbert fitzWimarch). Rodbert's man, according to the *Gesta*, brought news of Harold's victory at Stamford Bridge and warned William to be cautious. Rodbert is described as a relative of the Duke,²⁸ and he was made an official in the new establishment after the Conquest.

Just before the first encounter of the French and the English forces, Duke William is shown exhorting his soldiers to "prepare themselves manfully and wisely for the battle against the English." This corresponds with both the *Carmen* (vv. 314-34) and the *Gesta* (II.15), but is closer to William of Poitiers's version, since the Duke addresses his troops himself. In the *Carmen* the elaborate speech is put into the mouth of a monk who has just returned from the English camp.

From the above observations, it can be seen that there are many instances of close correspondence between the narratives found in the Bayeux Tapestry and in the *Gesta Guillelmi*. But it can also be seen that there are some surprising discrepancies, such as the outcome of the Breton campaign, the sequence of events leading up to Harold's oath-taking, and the location of that ceremony. In the main, the Tapestry's story corresponds with the Norman propaganda approach as espoused by William of Jumièges and even more by William of Poitiers, but it is a selective correspondence which follows the character, and not necessarily the letter, of the histories.

The balance of the Tapestry, which shows the actual fighting at Hastings, is closer to other descriptions of the battle. Of particular and crucial interest is the relationship of the Tapestry narrative to that found in the *Carmen de Hastingae Proelio*.²⁹ Most of the battle scenes correspond with the description of the fighting in the poem, and the depiction of the deaths of Harold and his housecarls appears to be a direct borrowing. The inclusion of the Count of Boulogne as a close companion-at-arms of Duke William also seems to indicate a knowledge of Guy of Amiens's poem. The *Vita Aedwardi* (II, f. 55-57) definitely furnished the scene for the death of King Edward, including the detail of the people present, their physical placement, and emotional reactions. (See plate 5.)

If the person responsible for the Tapestry's narrative deliberately chose many of his events from the stock of literary descriptions of the Norman Invasion, and decided to produce a piece of selective Norman

²⁸ *Gesta*, 170 n. 1.

²⁹ See my forthcoming publication. For a new and alternative interpretation, see David Bernstein, "The Blinding of Harold and the Meaning of the Bayeux Tapestry," *Proceedings of the Battle Conference on Anglo-Norman Studies IV—1982* (Woodbridge, 1983), pp. 40-64.

propaganda, he was equally aware of other literary forms. The inclusion of several Aesopian fables in the borders of the Tapestry³⁰ and similarities of technique found between the embroidery's narrative and the late eleventh-century *chanson-de-geste*³¹ must lead to a serious reassessment of the Bayeux Tapestry and its place in a larger literary context.

Because the Tapestry has sometimes been regarded as a unique object whose purpose was to present "historical truth," it has generally been studied in isolation, and the truly eclectic character of its narrative has been missed. Because the series of events depicted appears to be partly a deliberate choice taken from a variety of sources, and partly its own story, one must not use the Bayeux Tapestry images as corroborating evidence to determine what actually happened between 1064 and 1066.

A "true" historical source it may not be, but the Tapestry's narrative certainly does fall into the category of propaganda. The story illustrated in the embroidery is long and presents a complex series of events and relationships. It is a story shaped by a purpose, a purpose which was determined by the circumstances of its commissioning and use. I see that part of the character of the narrative was a deliberate and obvious recalling of the range of literary material then current describing the same events. We must also not overlook the entertainment value inherent in the illustration of a popular and still topical story. The author of the Tapestry's narrative, whom I see as akin to a "librettist," was obviously a well-read person, probably a cleric, who was familiar with the literature of the mid- and late-eleventh century in Normandy and England. The commission to assemble the programme for the Bayeux Tapestry was an opportune way to express his wide knowledge and perhaps to reflect the learning, real or otherwise, of the patron's circle. In doing so, he produced a great, and truly eclectic, work of "artistic propaganda."

³⁰ Hélène Chefneux, "Les Fables dans la Tapisserie de Bayeux," *Romania* 60 (1934), 1-35, 153-94; also Léon Herrmann, *Les fables antiques de la broderie de Bayeux*, Collection Latomus 69 (Brussels, 1964); and Dodwell, "Bayeux Tapestry," 559.

³¹ See my "The Bayeux Tapestry and the *Song of Roland*," *Olifant* 6 (1978-79), 339-50.