

1066

The hidden history of the Bayeux Tapestry



Andrew Bridgeford

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Аннотация

A brilliant new reading of the Bayeux Tapestry that radically alters our understanding of the events of 1066 and reveals the astonishing story of the survival of early medieval Europe's greatest treasure. This edition does not include illustrations. The Bayeux Tapestry was embroidered (it's not really a tapestry) in the late eleventh century. As an artefact, it is priceless, incomparable – nothing of its delicacy and texture, let alone wit, survives from the period. As a pictorial story it is delightful: the first feature-length cartoon. As history it is essential: it represents the moment of Britain's last conquest by a foreign army and celebrates the Norman victory over the blinded Saxon Harold. Or does it? In this brilliant piece of detective interpretation, Andrew Bridgeford looks at the narrative contained within the tapestry and has discovered a wealth of new information. Who commissioned it? Who made it? Who is the singular dwarf named as Turolf? Why, in a work that celebrates a Norman conquest is the defeated Harold treated so nobly? Is Harold indeed the victim of the arrow from the sky? And who is the figure depicted in the tapestry who, at the moment of crisis for the Normans rallies the army just at the point when it mistakenly believes William is dead and it will be defeated? Using the tapestry,

the book retells with vivid characterisation the story of the remaking of England in and after 1066. It is a compelling story, as is the tale of the extraordinary survival of the tapestry itself: history has rarely been writ so large, with such fine detail and yet been so veiled in mystery.

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Epigraph

Eventually
All things decline
Everything falters, dies and ends
Towers cave in, walls collapse
Roses wither, horses stumble
Cloth grows old, men expire
Iron rusts and timber rots away
Nothing made by hand will last
I understand the truth
That all must die, both clerk and lay
And the fame of men now dead
Will quickly be forgotten
Unless the clerk takes up his pen
And brings their deeds to life again
Wace, *Roman de Rou*, III, 11. 131–142 (c. 1170)

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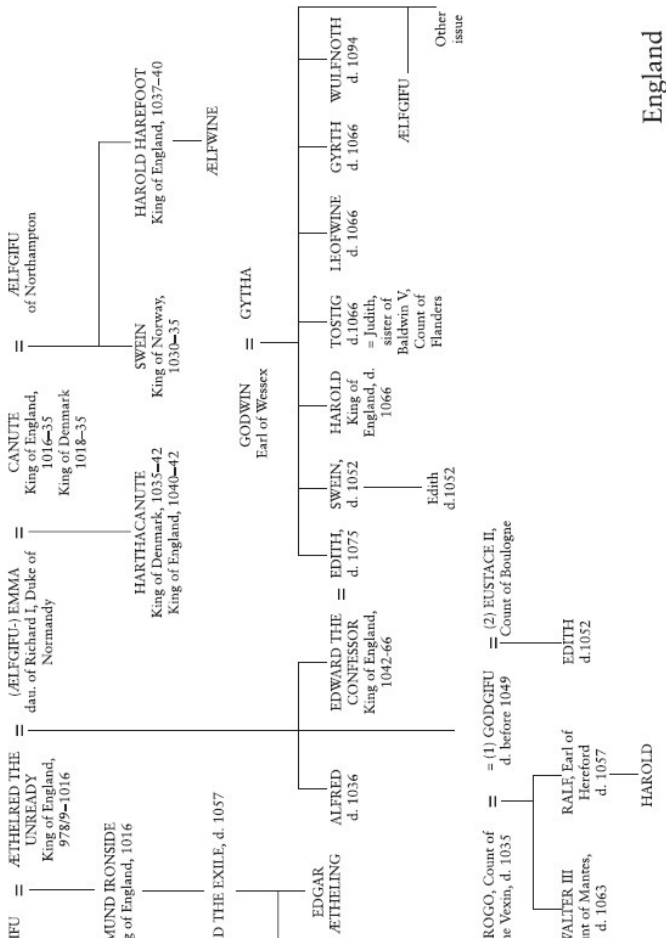
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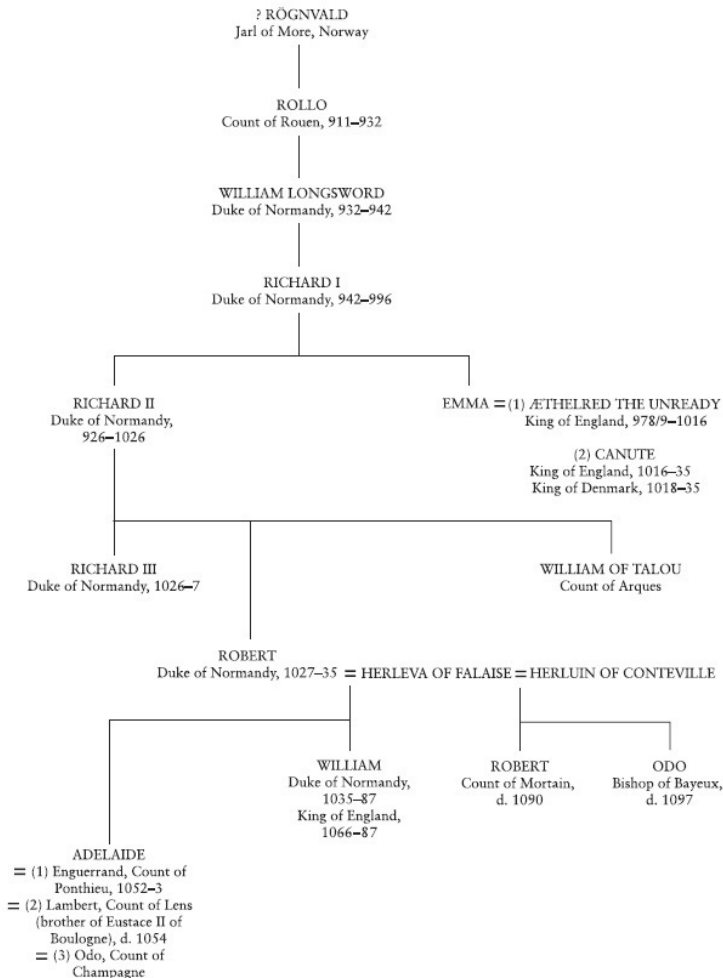
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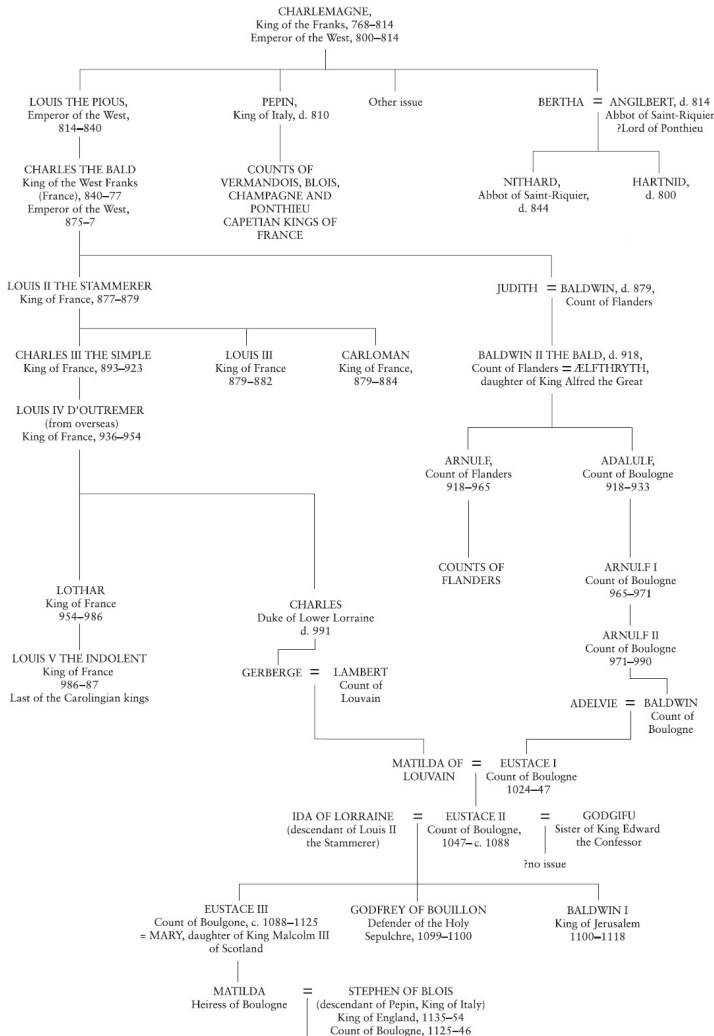
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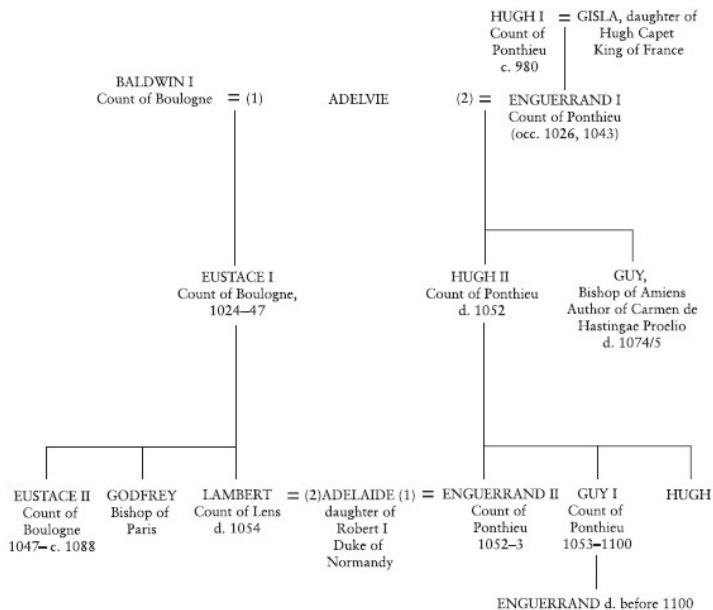
Normandy



Charlemagne / Boulogne / Jerusalem



Ponthieu



1 In Search of the Bayeux Tapestry

Five miles from the coast at Arromanches, in the gently shelving valley of the River Aure, lies the historic Norman town of Bayeux. From a distance the medieval cathedral emerges first into view, a faint impression of towers and spires, which gradually falls into sharper perspective as you approach the fringes of the town. War has touched Bayeux, but not scarred it. A ring road circumscribes the old centre, like a protective wall, and within its confines lies a network of shadowy streets and old stone buildings; and here and there the late-medieval frontage of a half-timbered house protrudes into the sunlight, as if it had emerged unwittingly out of the past into the present. At the centre of the town rises the enormous cathedral, a Gothic masterpiece built upon a Romanesque shell, its stark western towers, completed in the days of William the Conqueror, still soaring above the family of little houses gathered closely around its base. But it is not the cathedral, remarkable as it is, that every year draws half a million visitors to Bayeux. They come to see one of the most famous, intricate and mysterious works of art that has ever been made. Signs directing you to this masterpiece are dotted around the centre of the town. They are marked with a single descriptive word, in French and in English: '*Tapisserie*. Tapestry'. Here, in Bayeux, anything else would be redundant.

The route marked 'Tapestry' takes you along these narrow

streets, under the eaves of ancient houses and beneath the angular shadows of the cathedral. It passes by shops selling every item that can possibly be embossed with images of the Bayeux Tapestry, from mugs to mouse pads, tea towels to T-shirts. You may pause to recall the conquering exploits of Duke William of Normandy under the pale green awning of the Restaurant Le Guillaume or remember his wife, Queen Matilda, at the Hôtel de la Reine Mathilde. Not far away a crêpe may be consumed at the somewhat more alarmingly branded Crêperie Le Domesday. The journey takes you past these establishments and along the Rue de Nesmond until you reach a sizeable seventeenth-century building that was turned into a museum in the early 1980s. During the course of its long and dangerous history, the Bayeux Tapestry has been kept, and sometimes concealed, in several places in and around the town of Bayeux. This building is its modern home. Your eyes narrow at the museum's gate. Rain puddles scattered around the courtyard reflect the sun's fresh glare like so many broken panes of glass. A party of English schoolchildren has gathered in front of the door, a posse of noisy chatter, scuffed heels and clipboard assignments gripped with an innocent disregard. Two hundred yards away, Bayeux Cathedral is a silent witness to your journey, a stone silhouette imposed on a bright and changing sky.

You open the museum door, blinking as you enter. Inside it is quiet. You must buy a ticket. You follow a broad flight of stairs and then you emerge into a series of introductory rooms, like

antechambers taking you step by step into the inner sanctum of a medieval mystery. At length you arrive in the longest of all the rooms, a long, windowless, narrow corridor with an unexpected bend in the middle. It is here that the Bayeux Tapestry is displayed, carefully illuminated in the darkness behind a thick glass case. It is stretched out in front of you like an enormous strip of film, a great colourful frieze of the Middle Ages, bright and lively, receding narrower and narrower into a dim and uncertain distance. Although barely half a metre wide, the work is astonishingly long, incredibly long for something that is so old and that ought to be so fragile that if you picked it up it might collapse into shreds. It runs for as far as can be seen along the wall of this narrow gallery, and then it rounds a bend and continues for as long again. It is, in total, about seventy metres in length; and it would have been perhaps ten metres longer had the final scenes not been lost at some distant point in the past. Even as it is, the surviving tapestry would outstretch Nelson's Column by more than a third of its height.

The dramatic story of the Norman invasion of England in 1066 is set out in these threads, stitched by contemporaries and preserved and displayed here, in the very heart of victorious Normandy. Despite its great age and fragility, the work is uniquely well preserved. Most of what we see today is entirely original, and in those places where it has been repaired, the marks left by the original stitches seem, with certain exceptions, to have been followed with care, and such restorations as have

been made to the tapestry do not generally interfere with the thrust of its interpretation.¹ Embroidered on to a plain linen background in wools of red, yellow, grey, two greens and three shades of blue, the tapestry remains, against all expectation, as bright and captivating as if it had been made yesterday rather than nearly a thousand years ago. As you step along, the dimly lit gallery, the extraordinary story unfolds. The linen stage fills up quickly with busy figures, in castles and halls, on ships and on horseback, urgently looking here, pointing there, full of meaning, their voices straining through the centuries to tell us something secret and important. This is a medieval tale of intrigue, danger and war. It begins with the mysterious events that occurred a year or two before 1066 – the crucial background to what followed – before building to a climax with the events that made 1066 the most decisive year in English history. Amidst all the high drama, everyday details, recorded incidentally and without pretension by the artist, vividly bring his world to life: here some men are feasting on spitted birds; there they are drinking wine from ivory horns; others hunt, sow or go to church; men wade through the shallow water with their tunics hitched high or struggle, bent forward, to load heavy provisions on to a waiting ship. Each time you look, it seems that some further beguiling detail, previously missed, becomes apparent. The work is at once accessible and straightforward and yet at the same time deeply mysterious and arcane. A Latin commentary running along the top of the main frieze by turns illuminates and then infuriates

us by its very terseness and ambiguity. Above and below the main frieze, two narrow borders are filled with strange designs: creatures, real and mythical, ancient fables drawn from Classical authors, astrological symbols, scenes of everyday life, the odd erotic incident.

Despite all the signs saying ‘Tapestry’ the Bayeux Tapestry is not a tapestry at all. It is, to be more accurate, an embroidery, for the images are stitched on to the fabric, rather than woven out of it in the true manner of tapestry-making. That said, the work is probably the most famous ‘tapestry’ in the world and it would be unnecessarily pedantic to insist on calling it anything else. It stands alone. We have no equivalent wall hanging from its time to hold up for comparison, nor do we have any document which describes when, why and by whom it was made. What can be known about the Bayeux Tapestry can only be deduced by historical detective work. Likewise, how it came to be in Bayeux, where it only appears in the surviving records in 1476, must be surmised, if at all, from evidence.

Even after you have seen the Bayeux Tapestry many times, the detail, length and complexity of the work remain astonishing and beguiling. Depicted along its length are 626 human figures, 202 horses, 55 dogs, 505 other animals, 49 trees, 37 buildings and 41 ships. It is a man’s tale: of 626 human figures only three in the main frieze, and two in the borders, are female. There are a few intriguing instances where the identity of a person, although not named, can be deciphered; but to identify individuals we are

generally reliant on the running Latin inscription.

The inscription singles out by name a mere fifteen of the woollen actors; clearly, these are the key players in any quest to understand the true origin and meaning of the work. The named characters belong, for the most part, to the higher echelons of medieval society and they include famous men who would appear in any account of 1066; men such as Edward the Confessor, the old English king, and the two main rivals for his throne, Earl Harold of Wessex and Duke William of Normandy. In addition, however, four very obscure characters are also identified: a dwarf called Turolde, depicted in the role of a groom [plate 1]; an English lady identified as Ælfgyva, seemingly embroiled in illicit liaison with a priest [plate 3]; and two minor Norman knights of no obvious significance, Wadard and Vital [plates 8 and 9]. The little dwarf, the elegant but scandalous lady and the two lesser-ranking Norman knights share the limelight with kings, dukes, counts, earls and bishops, teasing us to rediscover from other sources who they were and what strange significance they had in the artist's vision of 1066. We must attempt to turn these curious characters into more rounded individuals. Amongst those who are better known is Bishop Odo of Bayeux [plate 10]. Odo was William's greedy and ambitious half-brother. A key supporter of Duke William, he became, thanks to the Conquest, one of the richest men ever to have lived in England. Compared to other contemporary accounts, the Bayeux Tapestry gives Odo a surprising degree of prominence in the story of 1066. Studies of

the tapestry have devoted much attention to the flattering way in which Bishop Odo is portrayed, but the focus on Odo has eclipsed the emphasis which is more subtly placed on others and it has obscured some of the more astonishing layers of hidden meaning in the work.

The popular conception of the Bayeux Tapestry is that it is a work of Norman triumphalism, of immense historical interest, no doubt, but ultimately a straightforward work produced by the Normans in order to celebrate and justify the conquest of England. Read any one of the many popular accounts and you will be told a similar story. It is said that we can see, in these threads, the childless English king, Edward the Confessor, near the end of his life, sending his foremost earl, Harold of Wessex, on a mission to Normandy; that Harold's mission is to confirm to Edward's distant cousin, Duke William of Normandy, that the old king has chosen him to be his heir; that after a misadventure in another part of France, from which Duke William obligingly rescues him, Earl Harold duly swears a solemn oath to be William's man. Back in England, however, when Edward dies in January 1066, Harold treacherously seizes the throne for himself. Duke William has been cruelly wronged by the greedy Englishman and so he assembles a large Norman army and invades England in order to claim his rightful inheritance; and in the end, of course, he defeats the perfidious English at the Battle of Hastings (though not without a little help from his half-brother Odo) and Harold gets his come-uppance thanks to the famous

arrow in the eye. The story is told 'strictly from the Norman point of view.' 'It is all presented from a Norman perspective.' 'The story told in the tapestry is told from the Norman point of view.' Such is the view of the Bayeux Tapestry reiterated time and time again in travel guides, brochures and popular history books.

The truth is very different, and it is much more extraordinary. It has emerged only slowly over the last fifty years half-hidden in the dry journals and dusty tomes of academia. Much remains mysterious, and not all specialists are in agreement, but there are very good reasons to believe that the Bayeux Tapestry was not made in Normandy at all but in conquered England, probably within about a decade of 1066, and that the ingenious master artist, who drew the designs for a team of English embroiderers, produced a dangerously many-layered masterpiece. The result is brilliantly conceived, and full of hidden meaning. Only superficially does it support the Norman story. It is a testament to the ingenuity of the artist that so many ensuing generations have failed to notice that his agenda was in reality subversive. Working under the domination of the Normans, he designed the embroidery in a way that, superficially, would not displease the conquerors; however, at the deeper level he tells us a very different story. At a time when it was not possible to record the English view in writing the artist did so pictorially. What could not be said could at least be shown, subtly and ingeniously; and a work of art that the Normans could accept and admire was in reality a Trojan horse within which the English

viewpoint was ingeniously preserved. There is thus another story stitched in these pictures, a story that we must rediscover. It is a subversive account in which the Norman claim to the English throne, and much of the propaganda that the Normans were circulating, is systematically contradicted.² Far from being Norman propaganda, the Bayeux Tapestry is more like a long-lost version of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*. At last we can begin to unravel this hidden story and in the process astonishing new light can be shed on the dark background to Duke William's pretension to the English throne in 1066.

In the same vein, it is often assumed that since the Bayeux Tapestry shows the Norman victory, it must be a Norman work. Mention *la Tapisserie de Bayeux* to a French person and you will often encounter a look of complete bewilderment. Mention *la Tapisserie de la Reine Mathilde* (Queen Matilda's Tapestry) and you are much more likely to be greeted with a smile of recognition. Old legends can be very enduring. There was once a romantic notion, first recorded in the eighteenth century, that the Bayeux Tapestry owes its origin to William's proud and admiring wife, Queen Matilda. She and her busy handmaidens, so it was said, embroidered the work in order to celebrate William's recent achievement in conquering the English. This notion has long been abandoned by historians (in France as much as anywhere else) but the old name has proved uncommonly difficult to displace in the popular French mind. A plaque bearing the words *La Tapisserie de la Reine Mathilde* is still fixed to the wall outside

the museum in Bayeux where the tapestry is kept, presumably because numerous French visitors continue to arrive at its gates in the full expectation of seeing Queen Matilda's handiwork.

It is undeniable that the Bayeux Tapestry shows the Norman victory; the victory itself could not be denied. We shall see how the master artist set about subtly recording the English version of events that led up to the Norman Conquest, but more than that he sought to understand the Conquest in terms of the deeply held religious and metaphysical beliefs of his time. It was a tenet of eleventh-century Christianity that all great events were caused by the will of God. Thus, in seeking to explain how England came to be conquered by the Normans, the artist looked for guidance to the Old Testament scriptures and in the final analysis he sought to rationalise the subjugation of England as a divine punishment for sin. This was how the helpless, conquered people attempted to understand what had happened to them; the Normans, too, claimed God on their side. Yet there is a twist to all this; and the full implications of this twist have never truly been grasped. The artist appears to have been a supporter of Count Eustace II of Boulogne, a French count who, though he joined Duke William's invasion in 1066, was in other respects a rival to the Normans in the power games of northern France. He may even have had his own claim to the English throne. Generally misunderstood and wrongly called a 'Norman' in almost all popular accounts, Count Eustace of Boulogne was merely a lukewarm ally of Normandy and he was on the whole deeply distrusted by Duke William.

Yet in the tapestry only three persons, Bishop Odo of Bayeux, Duke William of Normandy and Count Eustace of Boulogne, are named on the Norman side as being present at Hastings, and of these three Count Eustace, of all people, seems to be given the starring role [plate 11]. Particularly close attention must be paid to the career of this ambitious and powerful Frenchman. The perspective of Boulogne, too long forgotten, ignored or misunderstood, holds some of the Bayeux Tapestry's most beguiling secrets. The quest of this book is to attempt to unravel these and other millennial mysteries of the work.

2 A Tale of Consequence: The Impact of Conquest

Today the walls of eleventh-century buildings, such as survive, are cold and bare and they give nothing away of the brightness and luxuriance that once clothed them within. Were we to be transported back in time, however, and to step inside some of the great churches or secular palaces of the day, it would not be long before we encountered bright and colourful hangings draped around interior walls, as well as painted murals and other decoration on the stonework itself. Thus in the great Anglo-Saxon poem *Beowulf* a secular hall is described as resplendent with drapes, 'embroidered with gold' and picturing 'many a sight of wonder for those that delight to gaze on them'.¹ The widow of the Anglo-Saxon warrior Byrhtnoth, who died in 991 at the Battle of Maldon, is known to have produced an important stitchwork hanging to commemorate her husband's death and to have given it to the church at Ely.² Nothing of this survives; its size, design and technique are simply matters of guesswork. The Bayeux Tapestry is the unique survivor of a fragile genre. Even in the eleventh century it probably stood out as exceptional, for few persons would have had the space to display a work so long and so vast, let alone the resources to commission it. That so many textile decorations, large or small, have perished in the interim

is hardly surprising. What is extraordinary is that even one has survived. It is doubly fortunate that the sole surviving work of its kind is the one that recounts the single most important event in English history.

Nowadays it is more fashionable to have been a conquered people, rather than a nation of all-conquering warriors. It is more correct to bask in the innocent glories of defeat than to trumpet the more tainted achievements of conquest. Although England is often portrayed in the latter pose, the invasion and conquest of the country by the Normans must rank as among the most complete and ruthless that any nation has had the misfortune to suffer.³ The Normans and other Frenchmen who settled in England formed only a small part of the overall population of between one and a half and two million, but they seized almost all the key positions of power. Within a few years, virtually all of the country's Anglo-Saxon aristocracy had been summarily ousted and replaced by a new French-speaking elite. One by one the leading bishops and abbots were also replaced by Normans or Norman appointees. Wealth beyond dreams, the spoils of conquest, now flowed into the coffers of the most important of these foreign invaders. By 1086, when King William took stock of land ownership in the country with his famous Domesday inquest, a quarter of England was held by just eleven of his closest followers. Of the 200 or so other aristocrats and adventurers who held another quarter of the country, only four were English. The great bulk of England's Anglo-Saxon

ruling class had either perished in 1066 or had been reduced to second-class citizenry in their own land, or had fled to a hasty exile. Most of the new men were Normans but an important minority were allies of the Normans from other parts of France and from Flanders.

A network of castles, at first in wood, later in stone, was constructed around the country in order to enforce the new Norman order. Few castles had been built in England before 1066. Now the motte-and-bailey castle – a square fortress built on a man-made mound – became a familiar feature of the English shires. The death of King Harold at Hastings had removed the one man who was remotely capable of uniting the country in opposition. Henceforth resistance was never more than sporadic, and it was ultimately futile. If castles dashed any hope of rebellion, the nation's soul cowered under the shadow of magnificent new churches and cathedrals, confidently built by the invaders in a frenzy of construction in the latest continental style. Elegant, soaring cathedrals, such as those at Winchester, Ely and Durham, are outstanding artistic legacies of the Norman Conquest. The famous White Tower of London is a reminder of the military might which actually brought it about.

No one held a monopoly of violence in these violent times, but it is impossible to ignore the particularly brutal side to William the Conqueror's character. It was this that made the Conquest possible. He was a man of rigid will. If he thought that he was right he did not flinch from acting with all the

terrifying force at his disposal, and with little regard for the innocent. The invasion of 1066, so vividly recorded in the Bayeux Tapestry, is a testament to the single-minded strength of purpose of the man. Less well known, though no less revealing, is William's crushing of a revolt in the north of England in 1069 and 1070 with a severity which touched all levels of society. Dividing his army into small units, he ordered his men to ravage the countryside wherever they went. Crops were burnt, English peasants slaughtered at will and the implements of farming everywhere broken and destroyed. It was a policy of deliberate terror: great swaths of land remained unproductive for at least a generation and there was widespread starvation – but of revolt we hear nothing more. Thousands must have died. Simeon of Durham recorded that corpses were left to rot in the streets and houses and that the surviving English citizens were reduced to eating horses, dogs and cats or else sold themselves into slavery. Every village between Durham and York was left deserted and lifeless.⁴ Fifty years later Orderic Vitalis, a monk of dual English and Norman parentage, poignantly recalled all the 'helpless children, young men in the prime of their life and hoary greybeards' who had perished as a result of William's harrying of the north.⁵ It was his reputation for this kind of brutality that enabled William to impose his rule on England. Few dared to speak out against such a man, still less to rebel.

If the immediate human cost of the Norman Conquest was large, the longer-term impact was in its own way just as dramatic,

and in some measure it can still be felt today. The events of 1066 profoundly influenced the subsequent development of British, and indeed European, history. The country was summarily dragged from a niche in the Scandinavian world and with a jolt its face was turned firmly towards France. In the centuries that followed England was led by a French-speaking elite whose interests, or at least ambitions, lay on both sides of the Channel. As time went by England became more, not less, entangled in the regional and dynastic affairs of France. When the Norman dynasty came to an end, with the death of King Stephen in 1154, it was replaced by another French dynasty under Henry Plantagenet, a great-grandson of William the Conqueror. The conflict known as the Hundred Years War, which finally came to a close in 1453, was the most prominent example of the long and often violent entanglement of Anglo-French relations whose ultimate cause can be traced back to a single event – the victory of Duke William of Normandy at Hastings in 1066.

The administration of England under the Anglo-Saxons had been sophisticated for its time and in their own interest the Normans took over the existing machinery of English government. The Normans retained, for example, the old Anglo-Saxon shires or counties as administrative units, and the division of England into counties survives to this day often with similar boundaries. Schoolchildren are taught that the Normans introduced ‘feudalism’ to England but historians are no longer certain whether this was so, or indeed whether the

word 'feudalism' is useful at all. If nothing else, the need to hold down and subdue a conquered land with relatively few numbers enhanced the personal authority of the king and his powers of patronage. More susceptible of definition, and perhaps more enduring, were the cultural and linguistic changes. At a stroke, the old English language became the tongue of powerless underlings and it ceased largely, though not entirely, to be written down, and the development of English literature, hitherto represented by Anglo-Saxon poems such as *Beowulf* and *The Battle of Maldon*, was quite simply stalled in its tracks. *Beowulf*, a tale of the old Scandinavian lore, has recently found a wider audience with the acclaimed modern version of the poet Seamus Heaney. If some French speakers scoffed at Anglo-Saxon poetry, which to them probably sounded incomprehensible and uncouth, they, in turn, contributed impressively, both as patrons and authors, to the flourishing of a new culture. French epic poetry, exciting histories and didactic fables, written and recited to entertain french-speaking lords and ladies in their new English castles, all represent important staging posts in the history of French literature itself. Some even believe that the first great work that was composed in the French language, the *Chanson de Roland* (the *Song of Roland*), was actually written in conquered England.⁶ Whether or not this is so, the earliest surviving version of the *Song of Roland* is certainly a copy that was written down in twelfth-century England.⁷

For hundreds of years the two languages existed side by side,

French for the richer classes, English for those of middling status and the poor. As Sir Walter Scott observed in his novel *Ivanhoe*, echoes of this social and linguistic division can still be heard in modern English. Many living animals continue to be called by their old English names (sheep, cow, ox, deer) whereas once cooked and served up on the tables of the gentry they acquired names derived from the French (mutton, beef, veal, bacon, venison). Only in 1362 did French cease to be the language of the English parliament. When in 1399 Henry IV succeeded to the throne, he became the first English king since Harold Godwinson whose mother tongue was English rather than French. Even as late as the seventeenth century, English lawyers were using a degenerate form of French in order to report cases in the law courts. The Normans never sought to eradicate English. William the Conqueror is said to have tried to learn the language, but he found it too difficult and quickly gave up. Inevitably, because of the overwhelming preponderance of people speaking English, and endemic wars with France, French slowly died out as a spoken tongue, and by the fifteenth century modern English emerged as the common vernacular of the nation. By this time the French of the Normans and Plantagenets had enriched the language with thousands of new words. The vast number of synonyms in modern English is largely the result of this grafting of French, in the wake of the Norman Conquest, on to older Saxon and Norse roots. If Harold had won the Battle of Hastings, the language this book is written in would have been

very different, a much more Germanic tongue.

Travelling around northern France today one can still find echoes of 1066. There are, of course, great Romanesque buildings erected, in part, thanks to money that poured in from conquered England – the completion of Bayeux Cathedral in the 1070s was probably financed by confiscated English wealth. Other reminders are less tangible but no less noticeable. From the hedged-in pastures of the Cherbourg peninsula in the west to the flat expanse of Flanders in the north-east there are many sleepy towns and villages whose names are poignantly redolent of some of the most famous British families. Each place is quintessentially French, each may have its café-bar, its boulangerie, its shuttered houses, its old ladies in blue cardigans who shuffle quietly down the street. It is from places such as these, with names like Cuinchy, Montbrai, Mortemer, La Pommeraye, Sequeville and Ver, that the eponymous aristocratic families of Britain sprang – de Quincy, Mowbray, Mortimer, Pomeroy, Sackville and de Vere.⁸ It is a testament of the lasting social impact of the Norman Conquest that to British ears these names still bring to mind a succession of plummy-voiced aristocrats. The ancestors of these families (and many others could be cited) were powerful men who settled in England as a result of the Norman Conquest, if not immediately, then in the second and subsequent waves of immigration.

In these varying ways the events depicted in the Bayeux Tapestry had an impact that can still be felt today, like distant

ripples in a pond long after the surface has been disturbed by the violent splash of a rock. That more than nine centuries later we can still perceive these effects is not simply a consequence of the Conquest itself. Since then the waters have remained largely undisturbed, for the Norman invasion in 1066 was the last time that England was conquered by a foreign power. No other unwanted invader – neither Philip II of Spain in 1580s, nor the Napoleon in the early 1800s, nor Adolf Hitler in the 1940s – has been able to match the extraordinary achievement of William the Conqueror.

3 Sources

Our quest is to investigate the true origin and meaning of the Bayeux Tapestry, to understand more about the characters who are named in it and with this to gain new insight into some of the darkest events of the Norman Conquest. This, of course, will require the story told in the tapestry's threads to be closely examined, but we will also need to compare it with the other contemporary accounts of the same events. There are a handful of these. Each has its own limitations; none has any inherent right to be regarded as inviolable truth.¹ On the English side of the Channel, two versions of the annals known as the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* have accounts of the Norman invasion, whilst a third comes to an abrupt end in 1066 shortly before it took place.² The fragile surviving manuscripts of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* are themselves national treasures. The monks who wrote the *Chronicle* attempted to distil the important events of each year, as they saw them, into single short paragraphs. Sometimes this can provide us with important information. The treatment of the events of the Conquest is pervaded by a memorable sense of sadness, but as a source for its key events and causes, the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* is disappointingly brief and superficial. It passes over in complete silence the crucial episode that opens the story in the Bayeux Tapestry: the strange journey that Earl Harold

made to the continent in 1064 or 1065. It seems that the authors of the *Chronicle* either did not know or were unable to reveal the truth behind Harold's mission.

The *Vita Ædwardi Regis* (the *Life of King Edward*) is a work which King Edward's queen Edith commissioned in the 1060s from a Flemish monk residing at the royal court and it is therefore usually treated as another English source.³ Edith, who died in 1075, was Earl Harold's sister. She is seen (though not named) in the Bayeux Tapestry as a dutiful wife at King Edward's deathbed in January 1066 [plate 6]. The *Life of King Edward* survives in one near-contemporary manuscript copy, written out around 1100 in the small, neat handwriting of a single scribe. The work itself, though begun before 1066, seems to have been mostly written during King Harold's short reign. The author's original plan had been to celebrate the deeds of Edith's family, notably her father Earl Godwin and her brothers King Harold and Earl Tostig. The events of 1066, however, completely overtook this plan. The anonymous scribe, having optimistically begun his work in order to extol Harold's family, now had to make sense of the disaster that had overcome it. He turned to console the widowed and saddened queen by presenting her late husband Edward as a saint in heaven, and the *Life of King Edward* thenceforth dissolves into hagiography. Its contemporary character gives it many points of interest, including a dramatic account of Edward's final hours, but the *Life of King Edward* is often obscure and the work as a whole seems

to provide little that truly enlightens the reader about the key events that led up to the Norman Conquest. Here, too, Harold's strange journey to the continent is ignored. Even more surprising is the fact that Duke William of Normandy receives not a single direct mention.

In the written sources emanating from the Norman side of the Channel, Duke William cuts, as might be expected, a much larger figure. A Norman monk called William, working at the monastery of Jumièges, covered the period of the Conquest down to about 1070 in a Latin prose history known as the *Gesta Normannorum Ducem* (the *Deeds of the Norman Dukes*).⁴ More detailed is the biography of William the Conqueror written in the 1070s by one of his chaplains, William of Poitiers. His work, the *Gesta Guillelmi Ducis* (the *Deeds of Duke William*), survives only through an incomplete version that was printed in the sixteenth century, for the only known manuscript perished in a disastrous fire in 1731.⁵ It is by far the most detailed contemporary account of the events that concern us and its author was clearly well informed. As such the *Deeds of Duke William* will always be invaluable; but it is also biased. William of Poitiers was a Norman patriot. At each opportunity he loads praise upon Duke William and odium upon the evil and usurping Harold. His aim was to justify the Norman invasion, after it had happened; few doubt that he embellished the truth, and even knowingly lied, in what is quite patently a one-sided quest to make the Conquest appear lawful and justified. There are times

when consulting William of Poitiers seems as useful as asking the editor of the Soviet *Pravda* about the inner dealings of the Kremlin, but in the absence of any similarly detailed English account of the same events it is William of Poitiers' story which has been widely accepted as history. He provides us, crucially, with the Norman interpretation of Harold's journey in 1064/5. He tells us that King Edward, nearing the end of his life, sent Earl Harold to Normandy with specific orders to confirm that he had chosen the Norman duke to be his successor as king of England. The Bayeux Tapestry is often interpreted as telling exactly the same Norman story. We shall uncover the clues in the tapestry that subtly tell a very different, and much more plausible, version of Harold's mission.

The earliest written account of the Battle of Hastings is neither English nor Norman. It was written in another part of northern France. What we call France today was then a patchwork of regions over which the French king, beyond his own limited domain, exercised little more than nominal authority, and sometimes none at all. Normandy was a largely autonomous region. It had been founded in 911 when King Charles the Simple, despairing of ever seeing an end to Viking incursions, agreed to sue for peace by ceding land around Rouen to the Viking leader Rollo. Duke William of Normandy was Rollo's great-great-great-grandson. By 1066 the Normans had consolidated their rule over a large territory stretching from the Cherbourg peninsula almost as far as the mouth of the

River Somme. To outsiders they appeared thoroughly French in language, custom and religion. They nevertheless retained a distinctive sense of identity, aloof, as Norman rather than 'French' in a more limited sense. The French neighbours of Normandy, on the other hand, had much to fear from the growing power of the duchy and in no sense should they ever be called 'Normans'. To the north and east of Normandy lay the counties of important non-Norman magnates such as Count Guy of Ponthieu and his kinsman Count Eustace II of Boulogne. Both had been enemies of Normandy in the 1050s and in lending support to Duke William's invasion of 1066 they were moved only by their own concerns. It is, therefore, of considerable interest that the earliest surviving account of the Battle of Hastings was written by a non-Norman Frenchman, Bishop Guy of Amiens, who was the uncle of Count Guy of Ponthieu and an uncle or step-uncle of Count Eustace of Boulogne.

Bishop Guy's work is a substantial Latin poem called *Carmen de Hastingsae Proelio* (the *Song of the Battle of Hastings*).⁶ Although long known to have existed, his account of the battle was not rediscovered until 1826, when the archivist to the king of Hanover happened to stumble across two twelfth-century copies while researching in the Royal Library in Brussels. It was a fortuitous find. The *Carmen* was possibly written as early as 1067 and certainly before Bishop Guy died in 1074 or 1075. It gives us a distinctively French, but non-Norman, perspective on the events of 1066, a continental counterpoint to the Norman

biases of William of Poitiers. Unlike the Norman sources, but intriguingly like the tapestry, the author of the *Carmen* portrays Count Eustace II of Boulogne as the hero at Hastings.

As the years went by further writers added their own accounts. An English monk named Eadmer, working at the abbey of Christ Church in Canterbury, wrote the *Historia Novorum in Anglia* (the *History of Recent Events in England*) between about 1095 and 1123.⁷ Usually disregarded in favour of earlier sources, Eadmer's brief account of the Norman Conquest in his *History* flatly contradicts the Norman background to 1066 and it deserves much greater attention than it has conventionally been given. Other twelfth-century writers followed Eadmer's lead and showed a marked degree of sympathy for the conquered English, although they still justified the Norman victory as leading to improvements in standards of monasticism and morals in the country. In England there were John of Worcester, Henry of Huntingdon and William of Malmesbury; in Normandy there were Orderic Vitalis in the first half of the twelfth century and in the second the Jersey-born poet Wace.⁸

Orderic Vitalis was familiar with the complete version of William of Poitiers' *Gesta*, which he used extensively, though not without discretion, and he provides us with the most detailed and useful of the twelfth-century accounts of the Norman Conquest. Born near Shrewsbury in 1075 to an English mother and a Norman father, Orderic was placed by his parents in the Norman monastery of Saint-Evroul at the age of ten, 'a weeping child',

he tells us, 'unknown to all, knowing no one'. He spent his whole life as a monk there, devoting himself to researching and writing. He wrote a continuation of the history of William of Jumièges, and then, between 1115 and 1141, he threw himself into a much larger project, a history of the Normans, which he called his *Ecclesiastical History*. Orderic's own beautifully neat copy of this work survives in the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris. Divided in his sympathies between the England of his boyhood and the Normandy of his education and adult years, Orderic justified the Conquest of 1066 as bringing Church reform to England, but at the same time he did not flinch, where necessary, from criticising the brutality of the conquerors. He even makes William the Conqueror refer to himself as a 'cruel murderer' as he lies dying in 1087 and has him make the following rather uncharacteristic (and unlikely) admission: 'I treated the native inhabitants [of England] with unreasonable severity, cruelly, oppressed high and low, unjustly disinherited many, and caused the death of thousands by starvation and war, especially in Yorkshire.'⁹

Written sources such as these are the bedrock of historical investigation. The story told in these black-letter records is exciting and revealing and puzzling. Yet when you close these books and pass to the Bayeux Tapestry your imagination still feels as if it has emerged out of the darkness of a cave into a world of sunlit colours. These busy little figures are not just eleventh-century cartoon characters stitched on to linen. They stand for real people, real people whose lives were changed, and in some

cases ended, by the greatest of all events in English history. More than that, recorded in these threads are forgotten stories yet to be retold.

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