

Bayeux Tapestry

What is it? An embroidery, not a tapestry, 230ft long (70metres). 50 scenes with Latin tituli. Probably commissioned by House of Normandy and essentially depicts Norman viewpoint. Fact that narrative extensively covers Harold's activities in Normandy in 1064, indicates the intention to show a strong link between that expedition and the Norman conquest two years later. It is this reason that makes modern scholars view tapestry as apologia for Norman Conquest.

First reference is 1476 inventory of Bayeux Cathedral. Rediscovered by scholars in 1729 at a time when it was being displayed annually in the Cathedral.

During the French revolution, it was confiscated as public property to be used for covering military wagons. It was rescued from a wagon by a local lawyer who stored it in his house until the troubles were over, when he sent it to the city administrators for safekeeping.

After the Terror, was in Paris for display at the Musee Napoleon. After Napoleon decided not to invade Britain it lost its propaganda value and was sent back to Bayeux. In WWII the Gestapo took the tapestry to the Louvre; just before withdrawal from Paris, Himmler ordered that it should be taken to a place of safety but the SS arrived too late – the Louvre was again in French hands. After the liberation, the tapestry was again on display in the Louvre and in 1945 was returned to Bayeux where it is exhibited at Musee de la tapisserie de Bayeux.

Who commissioned it? Balance of opinion is Odo of Bayeux to adorn his own cathedral and that it was done in England (i) 3 of his followers mentioned in Domesday appear in it (ii) it was found in Bayeux Cathedral which Odo built (iii) it may have been commissioned at the same time as the cathedral's construction in the 1070s, possibly completed by 1077 in time for the cathedral's dedication. Latin text contains some hints of Anglo Saxon; other embroideries date from England at this time; and the vegetable dyes can be found in cloth traditionally woven there.

Odo was son of Herleva (William's mother) and Herluin de Conteville. Count Robert of Mortain was his younger brother. Although ordained, best known as a warrior and statesman. He found ships for the invasion of England and is one of the few proven Companions of William the Conqueror known to have fought at the Battle of Hastings. In 1067 became Earl of Kent and for some years was a trusted royal minister. Served as de facto regent and at times led royal forces against rebellions. Also accompanied William to Normandy on occasions. Largest landowner in England after King – land in 25 counties, mainly SE and East Anglia

1076: tried re defrauding crown and diocese of Canterbury – had to return a number of properties and his assets were reappportioned; 1082 imprisoned for having planned a military expedition to Italy (motive not sure) – in prison for 5 years, English estates and Earldom taken back by king; remained Bishop of Bayeux. William pardoned him on his

deathbed, persuaded by his brother Robert of Mortain. Odo returned to Earldom and soon rebelled in support of William's son Robert Curthose. Rebellion failed and William Rufus allowed him to leave country. Joined Robert C in Normandy; went with him on First Crusade but died on way at Palermo in Jan or Feb 1097.

Other possibilities: Queen Matilda (William's wife) – French legend; also Edith of Wessex (Edward the Confessor's widow)

Mysteries

Is Harold the figure shown shot in the eye? That it is Harold supported by words Harold Rex appear above figure but arrow was only added later following period of repair. However, needle holes there had been something previously in place, maybe a lance. A figure is slain with a sword in the subsequent plate and the phrase above refers to Harold's death. This would appear to be more consistent with labelling used elsewhere in work. It is common medieval iconography that a perjurer was to die with a weapon through the eye. Whether he actually died this way is much debated.

Another panel a clergyman appears to touch or is possibly striking a woman's face. No one knows meaning of caption – a certain cleric and Aelfgyua; there are two naked male figures in the border – could represent a well known scandal of the time which needed no explanation but naked figures elsewhere with no apparent connection to the main action.

At least two panels are missing – perhaps even 7 yards (6.4m). Missing area thought to include William's coronation. A reconstruction showing Duke William accepting surrender of London and his coronation as King of England was made by artist Jan Messent.