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The Bayeux Tapestry

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The Bayeux Tapestry



The Bayeux Tapestry is a massive, 70 meters by 20 cm (about 230 feet by 20 inches), piece of embroidered cloth that depicts a period of history in England from the events of King Edward's reign to the period of the Norman Invasion and finally ending with the battle of Hastings and some of its after effects. The tapestry was commissioned by Odo the Bishop of Bayeux, the half-brother of William of Normandy (The Conqueror), but was produced in Brittan not Bayeux, France. The Tapestry itself is not in fact a tapestry at all as the embroidery which was used to create it voids that term but it serves the same general purpose as a tapestry of the period in that it decorated the walls of large building and told an important story.

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In modern times the tapestry serves as a detailed window into the past and gives understanding to an otherwise less known period of British history. However in the period in which it was created it served not only as beautiful room decoration but also as proof of the legitimacy of the reign of William the Conqueror. While it is believed that the tapestry is mostly accurate, it is still safe to assume that some liberties were taken by its creator as he was the half-brother of William and a member of the Norman house himself. That being said the tapestry is still considered to be one of the most important pieces of not only British history but European history as well.

“There is no other example, I think, of a record contemporary or nearly contemporary of an event so remote in the story of Christendom, detailed upon so considerable a scale and relating to a matter of such moment.” (The book of the Bayeux tapestry, page 10, Belloc, Hilaire)

It is believed that the original home of the tapestry was Bayeux cathedral after its completion in Brittan by Oda, bishop of Bayeux. While documentation is sparse, the documents that do exist state that during its time in the cathedral it served as a sort of event decoration and was pulled out for feasts and special performances by the choir. During this period there were several pieces of the tapestry that were separated from the rest and used more rarely than the majority of the tapestry. It is believed by some that it is in this time that the missing parts of the tapestry became lost when it was moved from the cathedral. Although it is not known for sure when the tapestry was moved, it is claimed in several documents of the time that it was moved when the Bayeux cathedral was raided by Calvinists in 1562.

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“On the 12th of May, 1562, the cathedral was pillaged by the Calvinists, who committed the most horrible devastations. During this rising the clergy handed over many of the treasures to the municipal authorities for safe keeping, and M. Pezet has conjectured that the tapestry was placed for safe keeping, in the town hall, and carried thence by the mob” (The Bayeux tapestry Fowke, Frank Rede, page 2)

Something unique about the Bayeux tapestry is its embroidery. As mentioned before, the Bayeux tapestry is not a true tapestry. The reason for that is simple, In order to be a true tapestry the designs and art must be woven into the cloth directly. The Bayeux tapestry however was not woven as was common at the time but instead the art was sewn together and then stitched onto the cloth as a sort of over patch. In this way the tapestry was meticulously created as patches over the main cloth. When the tapestry is examined closely the separation between the tapestry itself and the patched on pieces of artwork become much more apparent.



The artwork of the tapestry is separated into segments which follow a linear history of the Norman Conquest. It starts with the reign of King Edward and details his rule in a series of pictures and works of art that depict everyday life of the time. After the tapestry goes on with the

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story it gives a detailed picture of the funeral of king Edward and the beginning of the Norman invasion of the Saxon lands that had previously been under the Danelaw. At this point the tapestry changes focus from everyday life and festivals to open warfare and it slowly works its way to the battle of Hastings where William defeated the English and gained control of the island. Although the tapestry ends there it has been speculated for some time that there are missing pieces of the tapestry. This theory is primarily built off the fact that the section where William would have been crowned is missing as well as the piece directly after the battle of Hastings which would picture the English under Harold Godwinson fleeing from the Normans in defeat. Unfortunately unless some new breakthrough is made, these parts of the tapestry will never be known.

“After the strain of the conflict, there is something almost amusing in this scene, where the flight of the English is depicted. Here the tapestry in its present condition ends, nor does it seem to have ever been of much greater length. Lancelot, writing in 1730, says, that in his time the last scene of the tapestry was considerably damaged. In Mr. Stothard’s careful drawing, made in 1816, it is readily seen that all the missing parts have been destroyed by time. By the time the last restoration was made, in 1842, all the letters of the final inscription had disappeared.”

(A Brief history of the Bayeux tapestry with a description of the scenes, Fowke, Frank Rede, page 31-32)

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The tapestry was created in a period of great upheaval within England, France, and Europe as a whole. England had just gotten through a period of seemingly unending warfare with the Danes and had only just established a strong hold of the areas formerly known as the Danelaw. The Saxon rulers of southern England had just recently witnessed the death of their previous king Edward the Confessor. William of Normandy was the cousin of the deceased Edward the confessor, which made him a viable claimant to the throne of England. The prospect of being ruled by the Normans was not popular in much of England and although William had some support, rebellions broke out and he was forced to sail across the English Channel and invade England.

William's claim to the throne was not the only powerful claim however and several others including Harold Godwinson (Harold II), the Earl of Wessex and Harald Hardrada of Norway claimed to be the rightful heirs to the throne. Harold Godwinson had been crowned the successor to King Edward the confessor which gave him the strongest claim within England. This however did not stop his rivals from attempting to seize power and Godwinson put down many lesser claimants to the throne before marching north to York and defeating Harald Hardrada of Norway at the battle of Stamford Bridge. After his victory over the powerful Harald Hardrada, Godwinson marched south to face the invading Norman forces. The exact size of the Norman army is unknown and the chronicles of the time offer numbers that vary from 14,000 all the way to 150,000. While these accounts are seemingly unreliable, modern historians suggest more moderate numbers varying from 7,000 to 10,000 men, including around 2,000 cavalry. The number of forces under Godwinson's command is also unknown but the numbers range from 7,000 to 13,000 men. In an attempt to lessen the political fallout of an invasion of the Christian England it is speculated that William asked for and gained the approval of the current pope.

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Harold Godwinson and William of Normandy met at the battle of Hastings to decide who would rule England. The battle as depicted by the tapestry and chronicled by people of the time was fierce and bloody but ultimately William was able to defeat his rival and rout the English forces. William's victory at Hastings marked the final Anglo-Saxon ruler of England and the beginning of a long line of Norman rulers that would restructure England in ways that would define it for generations to come. After the battle William was crowned king and he commissioned his half-brother Odo of Bayeux to create the Bayeux tapestry presumably as a way to legitimize his rule and chronicle it for future generations but also to serve as a reminder to those that would challenge him and propaganda to those that would be raised in the new England he would father. Unfortunately the segment of the tapestry that depicted the aftermath of Hastings has been lost to the ravages of time. There have been several people who have attempted to remake this segment based on chronicles of the period and what little information remains of them.



This however is only speculation and the true likeness of the missing segments may never be known.

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The significance of the Bayeux tapestry is quite apparent in modern times as a tourist attraction. The actual tapestry in France has always served as an attraction for medieval historians, as has the more recent recreation in the Reading Museum in England. While they function quite effectively as tourist attractions the primary significance of the tapestry is that so little documentation survives about the invasion other than those which refer to or are related to the tapestry. It is also uncommon for events such as this to be chronicled in the way of tapestry unless by a bishop unless they possessed some religious significance. That makes the tapestry unusual because it was created by a bishop and for a church but hold little to no religious relevance of any kind. There is also the fact that chronicles of the time more often than not, subject to manipulation by the winning side so that they could be used as propaganda for their cause or simply to make their cause seem as though it was justified in the eyes of god. The Bayeux tapestry stands out because it is widely considered to be accurate and manipulated.

For such a massive piece of history to be unaltered and so weakly biased is not only rare but almost non-existent. Because of the accuracy of the tapestry and the records surrounding it, historians have been able to look back into the lives of the period and see what the events were like from the perspective of the people that created the tapestry without it being clouded by too much political bias.

“Though some historians have stated that the tapestry is nothing more than Norman propaganda - somehow excusing William’s right to invade and conquer England - some parts of it are less than pro-Norman as one section shows a mother and child being forced out of the burning home (set alight by Norman soldiers) as

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William's army advanced across Kent. "

(<http://www.historylearningsite.co.uk/domesday.htm>)

While tapestry primarily serves as a historical reference point for scholars to look back on, I feel as though it also serves as window into the history of art in the period and allows people to see the progression of art. While the tapestry is an amazing piece of both art and history, it is hard to compare the tapestry's embroidery to the paintings and sculptures of the renaissance age. The art in the tapestry is flat and not well defined and as such is less impressive than works that came along in later years, but it is also more detailed and more colorful than art that came before it such as the primitive artwork of pre-roman Britain.

Because the Bayeux tapestry is both art and record, its significance is bolstered even more, as it serves many purposes. The art of the tapestry allows modern art historians and artists to see how art in Europe developed and progressed. The artwork depicts the daily lives of the people of the early medieval age, which gives insight into the lives of the court and the peasantry of that period which would otherwise be lost. It gives a window into battle tactics of the time as the tapestry goes into great detail on the battle of Hastings and several smaller skirmishes previous to it. And most of all it gives a though understanding of them all in one, a cultural window into a period of history that is so often shrouded in mystery or simply lost to the ravages of time or the devastation of war. The sheer scope of the tapestry's uses make it apparent that it is one of the greatest pieces of British history that exists today.

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- The book of the Bayeux tapestry; Belloc Hilaire

<http://library.si.edu/digital-library/book/bookofbayeuxhap00bell>
- The Bayeux tapestry; Fowke, Frank Rede

<http://library.si.edu/digital-library/book/bayeuxtapestryh00fowk>
- A Brief history of the Bayeux tapestry with a description of the scenes; Fowke, Frank Rede

<http://library.si.edu/digital-library/book/briefhistoryofba00fowk>
- The Bayeux Tapestry at the Smithsonian? Yes, but who made it, when, where and why?

<http://americanhistory.si.edu/blog/2012/09/the-bayeux-tapestry-at-the-smithsonian-yes-but-who-made-it-when-where-and-why.html>
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