

THE BAYEUX TAPESTRY

One of the great historical records of the British Middle Ages lies, not in a library, and not even in Britain, but in a specially-built tourist centre in Bayeux, France. The Centre Guillaume le Conquerant (for the linguistically challenged that

translates as "The William the Conqueror Centre") houses the Bayeux Tapestry, one of best sources of information on early Norman dress, armor, castle-building, boat-building, hunting, and other facets of daily life.

The Bayeux Tapestry, despite its name, is not actually a tapestry at all! It is embroidery, using colored wool, on 8 long strips of bleached linen which have been stitched together to form a continuous panel

about 20 inches high and 230 feet long. We don't know the exact length of the original tapestry, because the final strip is tattered, although its present length fits pretty closely around the nave of Bayeux Cathedral, suggesting that it was custom-built for that church.

WHO MADE IT?

The Bayeux Tapestry tells the tale of William the Conqueror's invasion of England through pictorial panels. We do not know for certain who commissioned the tapestry, though the likeliest candidate is William's half-brother Odo, Bishop of Bayeux from 1050-1097. Although we don't know for sure, it is speculated that Queen Matilda, William's wife, and her court embroidered it.

THE STORY

So what does the tapestry show? It begins with Edward the Confessor as king of England. Edward's sister is married to the Duke of Normandy, William, making the two men brothers-in-law. Edward is not married, nor does he have kids, so William thinks he will become king after Edward dies although at this time in history, the crown is not passed through bloodlines (primogeniture). Instead, the

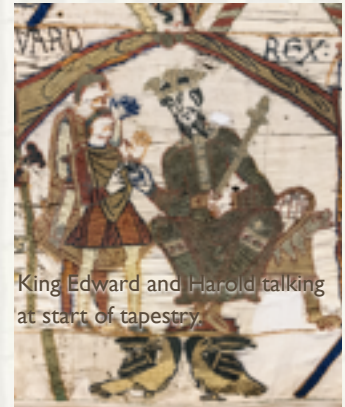


just a small part of the tapestry in Bayeux, France

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king chose his successor and he was confirmed by a council of titled men called the Witenagemot. (Harry Potter fans? Wizengamot? coincidence? I think not!)

Anyway, back to our story. The first part of the tapestry shows Harold Godwinson, a trusted advisor to King Edward, land in Normandy and get captured right away by Count Guy of Ponthieu. William hears his brother-in-law's friend was captured so he asks Count Guy to release Harold to him. Once Harold is delivered to William, the two hang out together and eventually William asks Harold to help him fight against the Bretons. Harold agrees and fights valiantly. William gives Harold armor as a thank you gift. Harold promises something to William (we will never know what) and he heads back to England.



King Edward and Harold talking at start of tapestry

Once Harold is back in England, King Edward dies after saying something to his advisors on his deathbed (again, we will never know what) and the Witenagemot names Harold king. William feels more than a little betrayed so he prepares to invade England and take the crown from Harold by force. William's fleet lands near Hastings in Sussex, and meets Harold's troops in a fierce battle. After heavy losses Harold is killed and the Saxons flee. The tapestry ends there, though we may surmise that a final panel showing William on the throne may have existed, corresponding to the original panel of Edward.



William feasting with his men before they travel to England.

*adapted from: Ross, David. "The Bayeux Tapestry".
Britannica. N.p., 2016. Web. 25 Jan. 2016.*



The Battle of Hastings