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The Bayeux Tapestry and the Song of Roland

WRITING AROUND 1067, Guy of Amiens described in his *Carmen de Hastingae Proelio* how a certain "mimus" rode before the assembled French troops at Hastings and juggled with his sword. The purpose of this bravado performance was to hearten the French and terrify the English. An infuriated English knight rode forward to rid the field of this arrogant intruder, but he was swept from his horse by the lance of "Incisor-ferri" and, losing his head, became instead the first trophy of the battle.¹ Some sixty years later the incident had assumed a different dimension when William of Malmesbury indicated that the story of Roland was sung before the French at Hastings to serve as an example of valour to those who were about to face a fight that could end only in victory or death.² It is not surprising that Wace, writing between 1160 and 1174, combined the two stories, and that the juggling knight "Taillefer" was said to have had the *Song of Roland* on his lips as he faced the army.

All that this proves, of course, is that the story of Roland's valor and death at Roncevaux was a popular model of military heroism during the twelfth century. It is difficult to imagine how the poem, as we have it, could have been performed while two armies were poised and ready to attack each other.

Nevertheless, the *Song of Roland* has been associated with the Normans and Hastings by many subsequent historians. The references in the poem to Norman activities in England, Scotland, Italy, and Sicily have tended to reinforce this association.⁴ Moreover, the values reflected in the *Song of Roland* belong not to the eighth, but to the late eleventh century, as the actual events and personalities of the original occurrence were transformed to carry contemporary relevance.

On the other hand, the embroidery popularly known as the Bayeux Tapestry would appear to present a straightforward visualization of the events leading up to and culminating in the English defeat at Hastings on October 14, 1066. The Tapestry begins with King Edward advising Harold Godwinson to undertake a journey to Normandy, presumably to reaffirm to Duke William that he, William, had been promised the English crown if Edward were to die childless. It now ends with the English defeat at Hastings, but unfortunately this end is badly damaged, and we have no

indication of how much of the fabric has been lost.

The Tapestry has been described as one of the most reliable historical sources for the years between 1064 and 1066, providing us with an indication of the political relationships between Normandy and England.⁵ In a series of recent papers, I have taken issue with this viewpoint and have tried to indicate that the Bayeux Tapestry was not meant to be a visual recording of a sequence of actual events in the order in which they had occurred. Instead, I think that the narrative of the Tapestry can be understood and appreciated only if it is seen in the context of contemporary literature, including both historical writings and the developing *chansons de geste*.

I have proposed that the creation of the Bayeux Tapestry was a composite undertaking and included the employment of a person whose responsibility was to determine the nature and sequence of the narrative which was to be visualized. It has become apparent to me that this person was aware of the several accounts of the Norman Invasion which were circulating in the 1070s and that his narrative reflects a deliberate choice taken from these versions.

This person seems to have relied mostly upon French and Norman sources, altering these when necessary to create a version more favorable to his purpose. He has carefully modeled sections of his story on the *Carmen de Hastingae Proelio* of Guy of Amiens and the *Gesta Guillelmi* of William of Poitiers.⁶ Details were taken from the anonymous *Vita Aedwardi*⁷ and the *Gesta Normannorum Ducum* of William of Jumièges.⁸

The Tapestry reflects the character of William of Poitiers's reconstruction of events by emphasizing the legitimacy of William of Normandy's claim to the English throne, based upon Edward's designation of William as his heir and Harold's oath of fealty. Specific instances of borrowing from the *Gesta Guillelmi* can be seen in the inclusion of Harold's journey to Normandy as King Edward's emissary,⁹ the Breton campaign against Conan in which Harold participated,¹⁰ the importance attached to Harold's oath-taking,¹¹ Harold's coronation with Archbishop Stigand emphasized as celebrant,¹² the dispatching of English spies to Normandy after the crowning,¹³ the messenger sent to William at Hastings by Rodbert fitz-Wimarch,¹⁴ and William personally delivering the pre-battle harangue to his troops.¹⁵

The account of the embroidery also closely follows Guy of Amiens's poem, which was almost contemporary with the Battle of Hastings. Most of the battle scenes at Telham Hill correspond with the description of the fighting in the *Carmen*, and the depiction of Harold's death appears to be a direct borrowing from the poem.¹⁶ The inclusion of the Count of Boulogne, a non-Norman, as a close companion-at-arms of Duke William, relies upon Guy's work.¹⁷

The *Vita Aedwardi* furnished the scene for the death of Edward the Confessor, including the details of the people present, their physical placement, and their emotional reactions.¹⁸

The person responsible for the Tapestry may have based much of his narrative on the stock of literary descriptions of the Norman Invasion to produce a piece of Norman propaganda, but he was equally aware of other literary materials. The borders of the Tapestry include a series of Aesopian fables, and the influence of the *chanson de geste* can also be discerned. Although historical writings determined the incidents and details found in the Bayeux narrative, the basic approach was demonstrably influenced by the techniques and sentiments found in epic poetry. The *chanson* which immediately comes to mind is the *Song of Roland*, which is generally accepted as having assumed its present form by the end of the eleventh century.

One of the fundamental principles expressed in both the *Roland* and the Bayeux Tapestry is that of "consilium et auxilium."¹⁹ In the poem, none of the leaders, whether it be Charlemagne, Marsile or Blancandrin, acts without the counsel of his nobles and advisors. In the Tapestry, Harold accepts the English crown on the advice of the Anglo-Saxon nobles, William confers with his brother, Odo of Bayeux, before he orders ships to be built for the invasion of England, and the three brothers, William, Odo, and Robert of Mortain can be seen in council after the feast at Hastings. In a key scene, William, Odo and Eustace of Boulogne lead the charge together in the face of the fleeing younger knights.

Both the Bayeux Tapestry and the *Song of Roland* emphasize the strength and binding qualities of ideal feudal loyalty: the treachery and deception of the traitors in each case was a breach of feudal responsibilities. It is to provide the evidence of a binding agreement between Harold and Duke William that the first half of the Bayeux Tapestry presents the story of Harold's visit to Normandy.²⁰ Harold is shown as the trusted

emissary from King Edward. He strays into the territory of a hostile Guy of Ponthieu, from whom William rescues him, as William of Poitiers says, "at great cost and by threats." Although it is not directly indicated in the Tapestry, the Norman writings state that Harold was to have reaffirmed William's succession to the English throne.

The Tapestry then adds a more personal dimension to the relationship between the two men. Harold accompanies William on a campaign against the rebellious Conan of Brittany and exhibits remarkable personal courage and strength by rescuing several men from the sands of the treacherous river Cousenon. The expedition has a much more successful conclusion in the Tapestry than William of Poitiers allowed, for Conan is shown handing the keys of Dinan over to the Duke. In the *Gesta*, no actual confrontation took place and the results were indecisive.

This episode, in which the suppression of an unimportant local rebellion assumes a heroic character, was slanted by the Tapestry "librettist" to allow the bravery and success of the Norman army to be indicated early in the narrative and perhaps to foreshadow their later success in England. Perhaps meant as an example before Harold's eyes of how a rebellious vassal could be easily subdued by the Duke of Normandy, this endeavor results directly in the bestowal of arms and armor upon Harold, by William himself. In other words, Harold, having demonstrated his valor and recognizing the superiority of the Normans, takes upon himself the responsibilities of a vassal. The solemn culmination of the decision is Harold's oath on the relics at Bayeux. The preposterous conditions of the oath are detailed by William of Poitiers and it was assumed by the Tapestry designer that anyone looking at the scene would be aware of the implications.

Thus it is the double trust of Edward and William that Harold breaks when he consents to be crowned King of England. He allows himself to be swayed by the bad advice of the English thegns and by his own greed when he fails to refuse the crown. Here "consilium" and "auxilium" go completely awry. Harold betrays his double feudal bond by breaking the most sacred tie that can bind two men when he does not ultimately support William's claim to the English throne.

We are now in the realm of the ideals of feudal relationships and not dealing with the practices of the "real" world. It becomes obvious that the Bayeux Tapestry story tampers with actualities to present us with certain conventions which coincide with literary types. The plot-line is carefully

constructed so that the depth of Harold's betrayal is emphasized, and his coronation, which is accompanied by the omen of the comet, becomes the turning point of the narrative. The consequences are then unavoidable. His actions must inevitably bring about the battle which results in his own dismemberment and carries his family and supporters to destruction. Within this framework, the outcome is never in question, and the entire story is raised above the level of simple narration.

C. R. Dodwell has pointed out that the characterizations of Harold Godwinson in the Tapestry and of Ganelon in the *Song of Roland* are remarkably parallel. It is perhaps coincidental that they were both brothers-in-law to their sovereigns. Both are powerful nobles who have spent many years in faithful service to their kings²¹ and who are entrusted with important and dangerous missions in hostile territory. They are both handsome and knightly in bearing, brave and active in battle, and intrepid when ultimately faced with death. They have served their lords well, but both betray their trust as ambassadors and vassals for personal reasons: Harold for a crown and Ganelon for revenge. Both had to meet death because of their acts: Ganelon is torn asunder by horses and Harold is hacked to pieces in battle.

The families of both men paid the price for their kinsmen's respective treasons. In the Bayeux Tapestry, Leofwine and Gyrth, Harold's remaining brothers, are slaughtered. In fact, the only English casualties singled out for identification are the three Godwinsons. In neither Harold's nor Ganelon's case were the personal reasons for their actions allowed to excuse the depth of their perfidy. Ganelon and Harold are treated as individuals whose treachery was on a grand scale. They both played for high stakes, and, failing, both managed to bring down whole armies by their actions. But unlike the clear portrait of Ganelon in the *Song of Roland*, the actions of Harold in the Tapestry have to be augmented by a knowledge of contemporary literature to be fully appreciated.

In the Tapestry there is no hint of the belittling criticisms of Harold that fill the pages of the *Carmen* and the *Gesta Guillelmi*. The portrait of Harold's character found in the writings of Guy of Amiens and William of Poitiers is far less favorable than that found in the Tapestry; these two sources seem thus to have been used by the "author" of the Tapestry as a framework for events rather than for characterization. The French writers emphasize Harold as the epitome of both moral and military cowardice. It is to the hero-villain of the French epic and perhaps to the *Song of Roland* that one must look to fill in the missing components for the inspiration of

Harold's image.

It is almost predictable that there be correspondences between the images created for Bishop Odo in the Tapestry and Archbishop Turpin in the *Roland*. Turpin is not depicted as a prelate in the mould of a Lanfranc or Anselm but as a feudal vassal who performs his religious duties as part of his function as a loyal follower. He takes pride in his support of his lord, is a valued counsellor in time of war, and when leading troops into battle he personally kills great numbers of the enemy with great relish and fitting epithets. He willingly dies fighting for his feudal values.

Odo of Bayeux did not perish at Hastings, of course, but the character given him in the Tapestry is similar to that of Turpin in the *Roland*. Odo is twice depicted seated next to his brother William: first when the decision is made to build the invasion fleet and then when the strategy in England is being formulated. Although we know that the Bishop of Bayeux contributed a large number of ships to the fleet, there is no evidence in the historical writings and documents that he was an actual advisor of the Duke during the English campaign.²² Recent research has discovered Odo's signature on early ducal charters and lists of participants at ecclesiastical councils in Normandy. Apparently, from the beginning of his career, he was allied with William's ambitions to expand and consolidate ducal power. Immediately after the Conquest he was made Earl of Kent and the most powerful tenant-in-chief in England. His bishopric remained that of Bayeux in Normandy, while Lanfranc was made Archbishop of Canterbury. Odo was a political animal by nature and belonged to the secular Norman Church which was in the hands of a warrior nobility.²³ In the Tapestry, the portrayal of Odo as William's main counsellor at Hastings is probably a general reference to his allegiance to his brother—albeit with a slight embroidering of the facts.

William of Poitiers wrote that two bishops, Odo of Bayeux and Geoffrey of Coutances, went along to Hastings as spiritual advisors to the invading force.²⁴ Geoffrey does not appear in the Tapestry. Odo appears four times in the narrative, and in three of these he is labelled as *Episcopus*, so that there is a repeated reference to his ecclesiastical status. But the only instance of his performing anything remotely resembling a priestly function is when he says grace at the feast after the forced march to Hastings. He is shown as much less involved in spiritual matters than was Turpin.

Although we can be almost certain that Odo was present at Hastings, we cannot be certain of the amount of actual physical action in which he participated, if any. Odo is never described in contemporary sources as a warrior-bishop and he is not mentioned as taking part in the Battle of Hastings as described in the *Carmen de Hastingae Proelio*. There is no indication that he had received early military training or that he took a personal hand in suppressing revolts in conquered England. Nevertheless, the Tapestry shows Odo in the thick of battle, when the young knights were routed by the rumor that William had been killed. The bishop, brandishing a club, brings up the rear and helps to regroup the fleeing men. Ahead, the Duke turns to expose his face as an assurance that he is still alive and fighting. The Duke's action is described by both Guy of Amiens²⁵ and William of Poitiers,²⁶ but neither mentions Odo's presence. The decision to depict Odo actually fighting at Hastings seems to create a deliberate parallel with the heroic Turpin image from the *Song of Roland*. Perhaps this was to relate Odo more closely with the popular epic figure.

In epic technique, the foe must be of a status fit to meet the hero, and in all ways Harold is a fit adversary for William. In the Tapestry, Harold is consistently depicted as "Dux Anglorum," a title which was not Anglo-Saxon usage and to which he was not entitled, for he was Earl of Wessex. This provides Harold with a rank equal to that of the Norman leader, who is always labelled as "Dux Normannorum." The only element of the epic lacking in the encounter between the two leaders was personal combat. William of Poitiers says that indeed Harold had refused the offer of personal combat as a means of determining who would be King of England,²⁷ but no trace of this idea is to be found in the Bayeux Tapestry. No cowardice is permitted of either William or Harold.

In addition to the emphasis on treachery and betrayal, the characterizations of the two main figures, and the rule that only equals may be pitted against each other, there are similarities in descriptive preferences seen between the *Song of Roland* and the images of the Bayeux Tapestry. Two major battles are undertaken in each case, and much attention is given to the details of the military expeditions. In the embroidery we see the preparations for war, the building and stocking of the ships, the sailing to England, and the manner in which contemporary fighting was engaged. The leader harangues the soldiers before the fighting, and pennons with flapping tails are carried aloft as the armies go to meet each other. The same love of action and brutality pervades both the *Roland* and the Tapestry, where the borders are littered with the bodies of the fallen and armor is

being stripped from the corpses while the fighting is still going on. Delight is taken in the excitement and gruesomeness of battle to the death. The emphasis on fighting and strategy, the valiant last stand of the hero, the relish in gory detail, and the general excitement are all techniques often repeated in the *chanson de geste*.

In both genres, women play a very minor role. None is given an active part in the Tapestry in which only three appear in the narrative. The only one who stimulates the imagination is Aelfgyva, who is identified, but about whom we know absolutely nothing. Queen Edith is at Edward's deathbed, as described in the *Vita Aedwardi*. The nude females who appear in the borders of the Tapestry lack the delicacy of the Roland women: Aude who gracefully dies upon hearing of Roland's death, and Bramimonde who becomes a Christian upon the death of her husband Marsile.

Instead, much more attention is lavished on the horses which were so essential to the knights' success. While there are only six women to be found in the entire Bayeux Tapestry, there are 202 horses and mules. Much delight is found in depicting horses in all poses and having great strength and courage. Each has the heart of a "Veillantif" and not a few become casualties in the fighting.

One of the most remarkable aspects of the Bayeux Tapestry is that the story is told from a determinedly secular viewpoint. There is no indication of piety on the part of any of the figures. When Harold is shown entering the church at Bosham, it is probably to indicate the hypocrisy of his devotion, for the church had become part of the Godwin holdings through trickery. Bishop Odo of Bayeux says grace before a banquet but otherwise seems remote from the priestly calling. There is no indication of William's prayers and the relics of which so much is made by William of Poitiers and Guy of Amiens. There are no angels, saints, or heavenly visions. In its surprisingly pure secularity, the Tapestry surpasses the *Song of Roland* in which the heroes pray often to God, the King blesses his men, and angels visit Charlemagne to instill courage and valor into Christian hearts.

This intense secularity must be deliberate in the Tapestry narrative, for the literary sources were much more oriented to the idea of God's will. For instance, William of Poitiers constantly praises Duke William's piety, saying that the Duke had himself assisted at Mass just before the Battle of Hastings began, and had worn the Bayeux relics around his neck while

fighting.²⁸ Guy of Amiens tells us about the prayers, masses, and processions sponsored by the Norman Duke at St-Valéry just before the fleet sailed for England.²⁹ The Pope was reported to have sent a banner to show his support for the Norman cause,³⁰ and although some see this papal gonfanon in several places in the Tapestry, I do not. Nor do I see traces of a "crusading" aspect in the manner in which the Battle of Hastings is depicted.³¹

It is my contention that the Bayeux Tapestry was not meant as a church decoration and was not meant to be exhibited in Odo's cathedral at Bayeux, as is popularly accepted. Because of its completely secular character, instances of bawdiness in the borders, and the many deliberate correspondences with secular literature, I suggest that it was meant to be displayed in a secular setting. Its physical properties (size and proportions, small visual details, etc.) would make it best suited for display along the long unbroken walls of a Great Hall in a palace.³² As a secular object, the Bayeux Tapestry would have made a striking setting in a space in which the *chanson de geste*, or more particularly, the *Song of Roland* was recited. Both were meant for the same warrior audience and used many of the same devices, namely, a story-line which emphasizes the necessity of a just war, ideal feudal loyalty and its betrayal with the dire consequences, the overwhelming concern with battles fought at great costs to both sides. Both are based on actual incidents which are treated rather freely in order to increase the moral message.

The many correspondences with a variety of literary sources were, I feel, meant to reflect the learning of the person who was responsible for the invention of the program for the Tapestry, and, indirectly, to indicate the erudition of its patron. The former was probably one of the young clerics whom Odo had supported and educated, and this was a marvelous opportunity to exhibit his skill and appreciation. I think that the consonance between the Tapestry and the secular song of deeds was deliberate, and further, that the underlying tone of the Bayeux narrative is related to the sentiments found in the *Song of Roland*.

But the question remains. What does the correspondence between the two works indicate? Did the author of the narrative used in the Bayeux Tapestry have a direct knowledge of the *Song of Roland* as we know it, and, if so, does this indicate that the poem had been formulated before the Tapestry was made, a date which certainly must fall between 1067 and 1097, or, as I think, between 1083 and 1087?³³

The answer to the question must be approached with caution. The person who created the narrative for the Bayeux Tapestry was undoubtedly familiar with the *Song of Roland* through some unidentified tradition, because of seemingly deliberate correspondences. The alterations he made to the information found in the other sources he used appear to support this conclusion. At least the sections of the epic which deal with the Roland-Ganelon confrontation have their parallels in the Bayeux Tapestry. Even the possibility that the two works both took form during the 1080's lies within the realm of plausibility. But because there are not exact text-image correspondences between the *Song of Roland* and the Bayeux Tapestry, proof that the narrative author of the embroidery had specific knowledge of the early Roland text now known unfortunately still eludes us.

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¹The *Carmen de Hastingae Proelio of Guy, Bishop of Amiens*, edited and translated by C. Morton and H. Muntz, (Oxford, 1972) vv. 398-409.

²William of Malmesbury, (Rolls Series, 1887-89), p. 302.

³Wace, *Roman de Rou*, edited by H. Andresen, vol. II, p. 348, vv. 8035-8040.

⁴David Douglas, "The *Song of Roland* and the Norman Conquest of England," *French Studies*, 14 (April 1960) 2, pp. 99-116.

⁵David Douglas and George Greenaway, *English Historical Documents, 1042-1189*, (New York, 1953), p. 217.

⁶William of Poitiers, *Gesta Guillelmi ducis Normannorum et regis Anglorum*, edited and translated by Raymonde Foreville, (Paris, 1952).

⁷*Vita Aedwardi Regis qui apud Westmonasterium requiescat*, edited and translated by Frank Barlow, (Edinburgh, 1962).

⁸William of Jumièges, *Gesta Normannorum ducum*, edited by Jean Marx, (Rouen and Paris, 1914).

⁹William of Poitiers, I, 41.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, I, 45.

¹¹*Ibid.*, I, 42.

¹²Ibid., II, 1.

¹³Ibid., II, 4.

¹⁴Ibid., II, 10.

¹⁵Ibid., II, 15.

¹⁶Guy of Amiens, vv. 533-550.

¹⁷Ibid., vv. 525-526.

¹⁸Vita Aedwardi, II, f. 55-57.

¹⁹Jessie Crosland, *The Old French Epic*, (New York, 1951), pp. 4-8.

²⁰Charles R. Dodwell, "The Bayeux Tapestry and the French Secular Epic," *The Burlington Magazine*, 108 (November 1966), 764, pp. 549-560. The following is a development of some of Dodwell's suggestions.

²¹See *Vita Aedwardi*, Book I, which emphasizes the rôle of the Godwins in securing peace and prosperity in Edward's kingdom.

²²David R. Bates, "The Character and Career of Odo, Bishop of Bayeux (1049/50-1095)," *Speculum*, 50 (January 1975), pp. 1-20.

²³David Douglas, "The Norman Episcopate before the Norman Conquest," *The Cambridge Historical Journal*, 13 (1957) 2, pp. 101-115.

²⁴William of Poitiers, II, 14.

²⁵Guy of Amiens, vv. 441-464.

²⁶William of Poitiers, II, 17-18.

²⁷Ibid., II, 12-13.

²⁸Ibid., II, 14.

²⁹Guy of Amiens, vv. 52-77; 98-99.

³⁰William of Poitiers, II, 3.

³¹Charles Gibbs-Smith, *The Bayeux Tapestry*, (London, 1973), pp. 184, 187.

³²Because of iconographic reasons which are too involved to explain here but which will be included in an article on which I am currently working, I have suggested that the Bayeux Tapestry was commissioned by Odo of Bayeux as a gift to his brother William, perhaps for the ducal palace at Rouen. I think it was produced

while Odo was in prison in Rouen on charges of treason, and that its purpose was to remind William of the contribution of his brother to the victory at Hastings with the aim of a reinstatement into good grace.

³³Odo died in Palermo in 1097; he had spent the years 1083-1087 in custody in Rouen.