

The Story of the Bayeux Tapestry

By the eleventh century England had been invaded many times. In 1066 England suffered yet another invader: William the Conqueror, from Normandy. At the Battle of Hastings he fought for and won the right to call himself King of England.

The Bayeux Tapestry, a 70-metre-long piece of embroidered fabric, tells the tale of William's victory. This rich primary source reveals how the Normans viewed the whole episode. In a sense the tapestry is like a medieval cartoon strip. Its scenes are arranged in panels, each panel having its own brief caption in Latin. The tapestry panels shown on these pages tell us a great deal about life in eleventh-century England and France. We learn not only about political affairs, warfare, and armour, but also about everyday life. Primarily, though, the tapestry tells us a story.

A Vassal's Disloyalty

Years before the Battle of Hastings, an English earl, Harold Godwinson, had been shipwrecked on the coast of Normandy (in present-day France) and was taken prisoner.

The Bayeux tapestry tells us that William of Normandy spared Harold's life and befriended him. William took Harold with him on a military campaign, where the English earl distinguished himself by various acts of bravery.

A grateful William honoured Harold with gifts of armour and weapons. According to the tapestry, Harold in turn swore an oath of loyalty to William, thereby becoming William's vassal. Harold then returned to England.



William listens to Harold's tale of misfortune.

Some time later, in 1066 the English king, Edward the Confessor, died, leaving no heir to the English throne. William immediately claimed the throne for himself. On his mother's side, the Norman duke was related to Edward. Further, William said that Edward had promised the throne to him. At the same time, the Anglo-Saxon Harold claimed that Edward had offered *him* the throne on his deathbed. This claim, according to William, was a great act of disloyalty. No vassal should ever take something that his lord claimed for himself. By

taking a throne that William wanted, Harold broke the **feudal contract**. William felt he had every right to declare war on his faithless vassal.

About this time, Halley's comet appeared in the night sky, an event that struck fear in the heart of **Anglo-Saxon** and Norman alike. The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle describes it thus: "Then over all England there was seen a sign in the skies such as had never been seen before." You can see the comet, along with a messenger telling King Harold about it, on the opening page of this

chapter. People believed that such a dramatic natural occurrence must predict a coming disaster. Elsewhere on the panel are shown people pointing at the comet. Why do you think this panel was included?

Preparing for War

When Harold was crowned king by the other Anglo-Saxon nobles, William collected an army, built a fleet of ships, and sailed to England. The tapestry records the considerable achievement of building a fleet, collecting stores, and then



William's army got the food for this feast by raiding the surrounding countryside. He did this for three reasons: to supply his large army with food, to strike fear into the hearts of the English people, and to anger Harold. It was an effective tactic.

transporting an army of seven thousand knights—complete with their armour, horses, weapons, servants, and supplies—across the English Channel.

After reaching England, William holds a feast in a celebration that is shown in the panel on the previous page. Here we see the first course of the meal, with rounds of bread, fish, and wine. How do the Normans drink their wine? This contrasts with another scene in which the Anglo-Saxons guzzle ale from horns. Also in this picture you see a servant waiting on table. How does his clothing differ from that of the nobles being served? The caption above the scene reads “And here the Bishop [Odo] blesses the food and drink.”

The panel of the Norman feast shows that the Norman army was well fed and rested before going into battle. In contrast, Harold’s army, which had just defeated an invading Viking army in the north, was tired and hungry. As Harold’s **housecarls** raced south to defend their country, William’s soldiers feasted—and waited.

The Tactics and Technology of a Battle

The battle was a savage affair. On the field at Hastings the two armies tore away at each other from about nine o’clock in the morning until four in the afternoon. In most medieval battles, knights were taken prisoner and later exchanged for hefty ransoms. At Hastings, however, the soldiers fought to

the death, and casualties on both sides were unusually high.

The English tactic was to battle on foot using lances, swords, and axes in a formation called the shield-wall, as shown below. The troops stood shoulder to shoulder with their kite-shaped shields overlapping to make a protective wall. This battle formation made it difficult for enemy soldiers to break through the English line without being cut down.

The Normans did not battle on foot like their English foes. Instead, they rode into battle on the horses they had brought with them across the English Channel. These horses gave the Norman **cavalry** two advantages. First, the power of a horse charging across open ground could drive a **lance** right through



Even though the Normans were on horseback, they could not break the Anglo-Saxon shield wall.



In the scene above, a mounted Norman knight cuts down an Anglo-Saxon soldier, possibly Harold. Some historians believe Harold was killed when an arrow smashed into his eye.

a wooden shield and into the soldier’s body. Second, the extra height of the mounted knight gave him a longer reach when swinging his sword. Despite these advantages, the repeated charges of the Norman knights on horseback failed to wear down the Anglo-Saxon housecarls. In frustration, William ordered his knights to pretend to retreat. When they did so, some inexperienced soldiers in Harold’s army broke ranks to chase their enemies. They were slaughtered, and Harold’s **impenetrable** shield-wall was broken.

Without the shield-wall formation to protect them, Harold’s foot soldiers were butchered by their mounted

foes. This day of battle was a sad day for England. William of Poitiers, a chronicler of the time, wrote that “the bloodstained battleground was covered with the flower of the youth and nobility of England.”

Medieval Propaganda

The Bayeux Tapestry was created under the direction of Bishop Odo, William’s half brother, who fought at William’s side in the battle. Because Odo participated in the events, historians treat the tapestry as a primary historical source. William had the tapestry made to convince people that he was the rightful king of England, thereby discouraging others from claiming the throne. In a

sense, the tapestry is more than a work of art or a source for historical research; in its time the tapestry served as a very effective piece of **propaganda** for a medieval politician.

Making the Tapestry

After Bishop Odo ordered the tapestry for William, sketches would have been made of the various scenes to be portrayed. At this point, a team of highly skilled needleworkers began the embroidery work. The needleworkers outlined the figures in dark thread and filled in the outlines with threads of various colours. These needleworkers were either English nuns or daughters of the English nobility who had

perfected their needleworking skills from an early age. When the tapestry was finished, Bishop Odo hung it from the

pillars of Bayeux Cathedral in Normandy. By doing so, he claimed God's blessing for William's kingship.

Normandy: an area, now part of France, that was home to the Normans, who were descended from Vikings

tapestry: a thick, embroidered cloth picture used as a wall hanging

vassal: one who swears loyalty to a lord

lord: a feudal superior

feudal contract: the bargain between a lord and his vassal

Anglo-Saxon: the earliest English, a Germanic people

housecarl: soldier

technology: things humans make to use as tools

cavalry: soldiers on horseback

lance: a long spear

impenetrable: impossible to pass

propaganda: an effort to spread opinions or beliefs, sometimes by distorting the truth

audience: a hearing, an interview



The Bayeux Tapestry was so long that sections of it were produced separately and then sewn together. Englishwomen were so talented with the needle that embroidery work was often referred to as *opus Anglicanum*, or "the work of the English."

ACTIVITIES

1. Summarize the story told by the Bayeux Tapestry.
2. Examine the tapestry panel that shows William giving Harold an **audience**. Who is standing and who is seated? What does this say about the relationship of the two men? Why do you think William wanted to show this scene?
3. In the panel showing the Norman feast, Bishop Odo lifts his arm to bless the meal. Elsewhere in the panel, the Pope's flag is shown flying over William's troops. Why would William want these touches included?
4. Describe the purpose of the Anglo-Saxon shield wall. What military advantage did the Normans have? Describe the tactic that finally allowed the Normans to use this advantage to achieve victory.
5. In a group of four or five students, select one panel from the Bayeux Tapestry to dramatize for the rest of the class. Think about what happened just before and just after the moment captured in your chosen panel. Then create some dialogue for all the characters pictured.
6. Give two reasons why the tapestry is called a primary historical source. What would be a secondary source about the Battle of Hastings?



[King Harold] gathered a great army and assembled them at the ancient apple tree. William came upon them unawares, before they had gathered; the king, nevertheless, fought very hard against them with those men who would stay with him, and there were many killed on both sides. There King Harold was killed, earl Leofwine his brother and earl Gyrrh his brother, and many good men. The French held the field of the dead as God granted them because of the sins of the people.

—THE ANGLO-SAXON CHRONICLE, 1066



This brief account of the defeat of King Harold's forces at Hastings presents the Anglo-Saxon view of the battle, just as the Bayeux Tapestry presents the Norman view. What do the Anglo-Saxons say caused their defeat? What other reasons are suggested? Do these agree with the reasons presented in the Bayeux Tapestry?

TIME LINE

- 1066 • WILLIAM OF NORMANDY CONQUERS ENGLAND
- 1085 • THE DOMESDAY BOOK IS MADE
- 1096 • THE FIRST CRUSADE BEGINS
- 1147 • THE SECOND CRUSADE BEGINS
- 1169 • SALADIN BECOMES SULTAN
- 1170 • MURDER OF THOMAS BECKET
- 1189 • THE THIRD CRUSADE BEGINS
- 1198 • INNOCENT III BECOMES POPE
- 1204 • ELEANOR OF AQUITAINE DIES
- 1215 • KING JOHN SIGNS THE MAGNA CARTA
- 1227 • DEATH OF CHINGGIS KHAN