



Scala/Art Resource



Giraudon/Art Resource



Giraudon/Art Resource

# ***Bayeux Tapestry* by Anonymous English artists (ca. 1082)**

## **FOCUSING ON BACKGROUND About the Creation of the Tapestry**

The *Bayeux Tapestry* depicts the story of William of Normandy's invasion and conquest of England. No one knows exactly when it was created, but most scholars agree that it was probably made in the south of England sometime before 1082. The identity of the artist behind the tapestry is also a mystery, but it is likely that the work was done by William's wife, Matilda, an expert needleworker, with help from the ladies of the Saxon court. The tapestry was probably commissioned by Odo, bishop of the Bayeux Cathedral in Normandy (now the north coast of France), who was William's half brother.

Technically, the work is not a tapestry at all, for its scenes were not woven into a reversible, solid piece of fabric on a loom. They were embroidered with eight shades of wool yarn on pieces of linen. These sections were then sewn together to form a continuous strip of narrative art 231 feet (70 meters) long and 20 inches (.50 meter) high. Although the work has only two dimensions, the embroidery stitch used, called a couch stitch, gives an almost three-dimensional feeling to the tapestry.

The 72 scenes on the tapestry represent incidents leading up to the Norman Conquest and include stirring scenes of war, work, and recreation. The borders along the top and bottom of the tapestry are sometimes decorative, and sometimes they form part of the narrative, represent fables, or foreshadow future events. The tapestry, which was exhibited for centuries at the Bayeux Cathedral, has been repaired several times, and the final scene is thought to be missing. David Wilson, author of *The Bayeux Tapestry*, reports that the tapestry was used as a wagon cover during the French Revolution, until it was recognized and dramatically recovered by a lawyer. Later, revelers nearly cut it up to make a float for a carnival. Fortunately, the tapestry survived and provides us with an incomparable source of information about eleventh-century Normans.

## **The Story Behind the Bayeux Tapestry**

The scenes on the tapestry vividly portray events leading to the battle of Hastings in October 1066. The story begins with Harold, earl of Wessex, arriving to visit William, duke of Normandy. Harold swears an oath of allegiance to William. The moral behind the story in the tapestry may well be a message of doom for those who break a solemn oath—a serious offense in medieval times. King Edward (the Confessor) has told Harold, his brother-in-law, that he will be king when Edward dies. But Edward also has led William to believe that he will take the crown upon Edward's death. After Edward dies, Harold is crowned king of England. When William hears the news, he is furious, believing that Harold has broken his oath to support William's claim to the throne of England. William orders his men to build ships, and they cross the channel to invade England (top panel). After they arrive, the troops set off for Hastings. Harold is warned of the approach of William's army, and the fighting begins. The middle panel shows part of the battle of

Hastings. Finally, the Norman knights kill the English soldiers surrounding Harold, and Harold is killed (left part of bottom panel).

**Humanities Connections**

HISTORY: William the Conqueror was crowned king of England on December 25, 1066.

DAILY LIFE: One scene in the *Bayeux Tapestry* shows two men marveling at a giant star in the sky. What they were seeing was a comet, later called Halley's Comet.

***Bayeux Tapestry* by Anonymous  
English artists (ca. 1082)**

**LOOKING AT THE TAPESTRY**

1. Look carefully at the three panels. Describe what is happening in each panel.

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

2. What historical information does the tapestry give us about ships, clothing, armor, and warfare? \_\_\_\_\_

---

---

---

---

---

3 How does the tapestry show action? How do the borders of the tapestry relate to the action in the main section? What do you think is the purpose of the Latin words embroidered in each panel? Do these words and borders add to or detract from the overall effect of the tapestry? \_\_\_\_\_

---

---

---

4. What types of contemporary narrative art does the *Bayeux Tapestry* remind you of? How are they similar to or different from the tapestry? \_\_\_\_\_

---

---

**A CREATIVE RESPONSE**

1. Before starting to embroider, an artist usually draws on the fabric an outline of a scene to serve as a pattern or guide. The stitchery then covers these lines. (This preliminary drawing is called a cartoon.) With several other students, create the pattern, or cartoon, for an embroidery. Choose another historical event from the medieval period. (Use your references and other references as sources.) The event should include several scenes in chronological order. Before you start your drawing, make a list of the scenes you will portray, and then draw the scenes on butcher paper.