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Andrew Bridgeford, *1066: The Hidden History of the Bayeux Tapestry*. New York: Fourth Estate, 2004. 354 pp. \$37.31 U.S. (hb). ISBN 1-841-15040-1.

Review by Martin K. Foys, Hood College.

Andrew Bridgeford has spent a lot of time thinking about the Bayeux Tapestry, the late eleventh-century textile of monumental scale and design, whose content records and celebrates Duke William of Normandy's invasion of England, victory at Hastings, and conquest of England. The issue of his considerable industry, *1066: The Hidden History of the Bayeux Tapestry*, is a bit difficult to review in an academic context, as it has a perspective that appears more popular than scholarly, and should perhaps be treated in circles less critical than here. Nevertheless, *1066* does make some big claims for interpreting the Tapestry; its book flap touts it as "a brilliant piece of detective interpretation," that also promises to "discover a wealth of new information" that will "overturn received wisdom on the Tapestry." While such hyperbolic marketing spurred a flurry of popular publicity at the book's release in the United Kingdom, and no doubt accompanying book sales, Bridgeford's considerable labor regrettably brings little that is original to the table of critical debate. More alarmingly, to construct his hidden history, the author resurrects and props up, with scant new evidence, a number of obscure and marginal interpretations of the Tapestry, long discounted and justifiably dismissed in mainstream Tapestry scholarship.

Though the author makes heavy, if selective, use of the vast corpus of commentary on the Tapestry, *1066* resides somewhere between a scholarly endeavor and a sensational, highly conjectural treatment—as close to *The Da Vinci Code*, in a fashion, as it is to critical inquiry. Academic readers may find Bridgeford's style somewhat incongruous, as he often writes more imaginatively than objectively, and colors his accounts of historical events with subjective descriptors and imagined details. In his background to the Godwin family, for instance, we learn that for Edward the Confessor's accession in 1042, the king "had little choice but...to accept Godwin's oily hand of friendship" (p. 49); a page later we are told without qualification that the first scene of the Bayeux Tapestry, a meeting between Edward and Harold Godwinson, takes place as "a secret huddled gathering" (p. 50). Such a reading is arguable, of course, but a bit suspect. The opening scene clearly takes place in a palace, likely Westminster or Winchester, and was obviously well known—several literary sources describe the encounter (including Eadmer of Canterbury, William of Jumièges and William of Poitiers), while none of them note an aspect of secrecy. This is a small quibble, of course, but one that stands as representative of the greater concern for the general execution and main theses of *1066*. The author, as he frequently does throughout the work, here presents ungrounded readings, building more an affective and circumstantial foundation for his "discoveries" than a compelling argument.

As interpretative detective, Bridgeford relates that he has recovered "half-hidden in the dry journals and dusty tomes of academia" the truth of this hidden history—namely that the Bayeux Tapestry only superficially supports its understood function as Norman propaganda legitimizing William's claims to the English throne and subsequent military actions. Instead, the embroidery must be understood as "a testament to the ingenuity of the artist that so many ensuing generations have failed to notice that his agenda was in reality subversive" (p. 7). In the book's two main halves, a scene-by-scene description of the whole of the Tapestry's narrative, and then a series of chapters dedicated to background and particularly sticky interpretative moments, the author advances two primary claims. The first is that the Tapestry, long understood to have been likely embroidered by Anglo-Saxons at Canterbury, encodes in

its early parts a home-grown resistance that effectively undermines the work's triumphal and legitimizing program. The second is that the probable patron of the Tapestry was not Odo, the half-brother of William, Bishop of Bayeux and Earl of Kent, but instead Count Eustace of Boulogne, a nobleman with marital ties to the English throne who first supported William at Hastings in 1066, but one year later unsuccessfully invaded England against William. Let us take each of these claims in turn.

The idea of a subversive Anglo-Saxon code in the Tapestry has been around for a while—it was most notably championed by a small school of articles from the 1970's and 1980's that have not had a healthy critical afterlife.[1] Notwithstanding, Bridgeford dusts them off, and presents much of their arguments again (sometimes with only minimal acknowledgement), regrettably with no new evidence to speak of, and with plenty of highly questionable readings. For instance, he makes much of the possibility that in early scenes with William, a number of potentially (or, in Bridgeford's view "clearly" and "obviously") English characters are represented, and goes as far as to identify the marginal, seated figure in the upper border by Mont St. Michel as "a high ranking Englishman"—a reading based solely this tiny figure's hairstyle, a miniscule scrap of weaving so small its character is impossible to so surely read as anything (pp. 76, 79, 86). Taking such readings in tandem with a mistake of embroidery where three Norman knights have four shields and only five legs, and with the ambiguity of the inscriptions in these early scenes, the author concludes: "There are secrets here" (p. 79). The main secret, though, appears to be merely a rehashing of the extremely tenuous hypothesis that one unknown, ancillary and bearded figure in the ducal palace scene must be one of Harold's kinsmen, taken hostage years earlier during the failed Godwin revolt of 1051. Thus, the secret code of Anglo-Saxon subversion is revealed.

In support of such readings (and the book contains many more), Bridgeford also points to analogous material in Eadmer of Canterbury's Anglo-Norman *Historia Novorum Anglia*, arguing that this source, as well, has been "unjustly neglected" (p. 58). Eadmer, while not as well known as more contemporary sources such as William of Jumièges, William of Poitiers, or the *Carmen de Hastingae Proelio*, is regularly tapped in Tapestry scholarship; relevant excerpts and commentary receive substantial treatment in several standard works of reference.[2] More to the point, however, the use of Eadmer is practically moot with regards to the author's argument. The notion that the Tapestry could contain some aspects of English sentiment is not far-fetched or even revolutionary. The Tapestry is a manifestly complex and polyvalent discourse, shot through with contradiction, and the product of post-Conquest England, a period of massive cultural assimilation and hybridity. In his own, now canonical discussion of the Tapestry, David M. Wilson perhaps puts it best, noting that the Conquest of England by the Normans meant that the two cultures were

intermixed so as to strengthen and distribute English art in the Duchy as in England...Norman and English scribes and artists worked alongside each other on both sides of the Channel, [and] an Anglo-Norman Romanesque style developed in which it is quite often difficult to separate English from Norman elements. (p.3)

Bridgeford, on the other hand, sensationalizes (rather than sensitizes) the notion that one might find Anglo-Saxon material in the work, arguing that any English elements must be polarizing forces, the inclusion of which

for the artist must have been made at considerable risk to himself, perhaps to his life, certainly to his career, and we should pause and listen to his brave witness, at a time when all others were drowned out by the noise of Norman propaganda (pp. 80-81).

Pause, indeed—there is another way, here, I think. As I and others have argued elsewhere, the content and function of the Tapestry does not represent the past dualism of Anglo-Saxon and Norman states,

but rather the desired syncretism of a successful Anglo-Norman one, with William succeeding Edward as the rightful ruler, ordained by God, blood and might.[4] In such Norman propaganda, we should not be surprised at English and Norman (and French) elements, or that the designer(s) of the Tapestry may have cast a wide net for literary sources and inspiration for the Tapestry's narrative. The inclusion of English details (those that are actually evidenced in the work), and an account that aligns with aspects of the Anglo-Norman Eadmer's version is hardly surprising—it should be practically expected.

In making his second major claim, that Eustace, rather than Odo, should be considered the probable patron of the Tapestry, Bridgeford does adduce some intriguing historical evidence; unfortunately, such findings might easily be read otherwise, and his mode of argumentation again dilutes the force of his case with another set of questionable close readings. Anyone wanting to challenge Odo's position as the best candidate for patron, or at least as the most significant figure in the Tapestry next to William, is going to have a bit of a hard climb. Other accounts of the Conquest barely mention Odo, but the Tapestry gives Odo a first class treatment: we see Odo advising William on the building of ships, breaking bread at the invasion feast in the iconographic place of Christ at the Last Supper, and manfully leading the troops at Hastings; additionally, two of his noble tenants, Vital and Wadard, receive noted cameos in the textile.

In response, *1066* maintains that Eustace, with the blood of Charlemagne running through his veins, is likely "the central and most important person in the work" (p. 198). Eustace, according to conventional readings, appears only once in the Tapestry, during the melee of Hastings, with Odo and William, holding a banner and pointing out the duke to the troops around him. In *1066*, though, we find Eustace everywhere, and are presented with a beguiling array of readings as support. For instance, the fact that part of the banner design of one of the charging French knights has three *boules*, a feature that also appears on the later heraldry of Boulogne takes on staggering weight ("It would be hard to overemphasise the iconographic significance of this particular banner") (p. 194). Elsewhere, the desire to find Eustace results in simply fantastic interpretations. In the scene portraying the death of Harold, the author first wonders if the spacing of the inscription *INTERFEC TUS : EST* (*interfectus est*, "is killed"), with the last six letters below the rest, might encode Eustace's name. To do so, of course, one must first reverse the two groups of three (*EST TUS*), resulting in a new order which provides two-thirds of Eustace's name, now ready to be assembled by one who knows the code. Doing so, apparently, reveals that it is really Eustace who kills Harold. The fact, however, that the horseman striking down Harold "bears no obvious resemblance to the named Count Eustace of Boulogne is not particularly relevant," because if Eustace were to be clearly portrayed in the Tapestry, then "the secrecy of the message...would have been destroyed" (p. 196). Significantly, Bridgeford fails to note that this inscription itself is a nineteenth-century reconstruction, and might not have been the original text.[5]

The shame of such conspiratorial and proleptic strategies is that they obscure a few fine moments of interpretation, research, and discussion on Bridgeford's part, especially in later sections of the work. For instance, his consideration that the Tapestry actually emphasizes the French, not Norman contribution at Hastings is surely right (p. 142 ff.). Such a depiction, though, need not point to a subversive meaning, but rather to a cultural one; instead of encoding the significance of Eustace (only one Frenchman among many at Hastings, after all), the inscribing of *Franci* in the Bayeux Tapestry more likely speaks to the *Realpolitik* concession that William and Normans could not have taken Harold alone, and that the new king continued to reward and laud his Breton and Flemish allies for decades afterward. After all, William also still had Normandy to protect. Likewise, in his discussion of the rebuilding of St. Augustine's abbey and Goscelin's subsequent account, Bridgeford carefully and impressively charts the network of relationships between Odo, Eustace, Vital and Wadard, all connected through the Canterbury monastic house (pp. 272-294). But such relationships likely do not refute the conventional wisdom regarding the status of Odo or Eustace in the Tapestry, as the author suggests. They do, however, shed new light on how closely intertwined the personages and communities depicted in the

Tapestry were, not simply in the events of 1066, but more importantly, in the decades succeeding the Conquest—the time when the Tapestry was conceived, designed and executed.

Isolated from the context of the larger arguments of *1066*, such insights, at the very least, deserve further academic consideration and investigation. In many of his final chapters, Bridgeford presents a series of noteworthy observations: for example, concerning the possible association of Guy of Ponthieu's court and the authorship of the *Chanson de Roland* (pp. 225-245, though the connections made to the identity of Tuold in the Tapestry remain unconvincing), or regarding the notion that the lack of attestation of the Tapestry between the twelfth and fifteenth centuries may be related to the 1105 collapse of the Bayeux Cathedral's crypt, which remained unexcavated until 1412 (pp. 295-303). The mysterious Ælfgyva, of course, has her own chapter as well (pp. 246-271), with Bridgeford providing a rigorous (if largely redactive of Bard McNulty's own treatment) review of his candidate—Ælfgyva of Northampton, consort to Cnute and mother, briefly, to an English king.[6] As with many such treatments, though, why the figure might not refer to Emma-Ælfgifu, the mother of King Edward, great aunt to William, mentioned by Norman chroniclers as the blood tie between past and future kings, is never plausibly explained.

In each of his chapters, Bridgeford does excel at assembling and recounting the fundamental background materials necessary to begin learning and thinking about the Bayeux Tapestry. As an amateur historian, he has written a book that could well have served as a sturdy and accessible introduction to this iconic and monumental document of early medieval culture. Unfortunately, these positive attributes here are wound inseparably with a series of hypothetical convictions, presented as near certainties through questionable methods, that must be approached with a healthy dose of skepticism, if not avoided altogether. In the end, *1066: The Hidden History of the Bayeux Tapestry* cannot make the journey from basic survey to compelling critical analysis, and the author's central contention that "the Tapestry's content is far removed from the 'Norman propaganda' of conventional myth" must remain more accident than substance (pp. 306-307).

NOTES

[1] See, for instance, Richard D. Wissolik, "Code in the Bayeux Tapestry," *Annuaire Medievale* 19 (1979): 69-97, or David Bernstein, *The Mystery of the Bayeux Tapestry* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 163-164.

[2] See, for instance, the Martin Foys, ed., *The Bayeux Tapestry Digital Edition* (SDE, 2003) or Lucien Musset, *La Tapisserie De Bayeux* (Paris: Éditions Zodiaque, 2002).

[3] *The Bayeux Tapestry* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1985, 2004), 202.

[4] Martin Foys, "All's Well that Ends: Closure, Hypertext, and the Missing End of the Bayeux Tapestry," *Exemplaria* 15, no. 2 (2003): 39-72.

[5] See M.K. Lawson's treatment of this inscription in *The Battle of Hastings, 1066* (Stroud: Tempus, 2002), 260-263.

[6] J. Bard McNulty, "The Lady Ælfgyva in the Bayeux Tapestry," *Speculum* 55, no. 4 (1980): 659-68.

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