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Pierre Bouet, Brian Levy and François Neveux, Eds., *The Bayeux Tapestry: Embroidering the Facts of History, The Proceedings of the Cerisy Colloquium (1999)*. Caen: Presses Universitaires de Caen, 2004. 426 pp. Illustrations, tables, notes, bibliography. €39.50 E.U. (hb). ISBN 2-84133-213-6.

Review by Asa Simon Mittman, Bucknell University.

On the cover of this volume, Duke William of Normandy reaches out to Harold Godwinson's envoy, but the familiar image is estranged; we are looking at the reverse, the back of the tapestry. The text is backward, the narrative flows right-to-left, and the figures are ghostly, pale outlines of themselves. However, what is perhaps most striking are the three large, blank sections. Barely perceptible on the obverse, these patches reveal the checkered past of this remarkable work of art—this embroidery, the misnaming of which Nicole de Reyniès considers “such an embarrassment” (p. 71).

The placement of the reverse on the front cover (the obverse of the same scene is on the back) might be taken as a declaration of the methodology undertaken inside. Several of the essays in this collection are intended to introduce new technical information, to shed new light on the provenance of the work as well as increase our understanding of its complex historical context. The collection began as the proceedings of a colloquium entitled “La Tapisserie de Bayeux, l'art de broder l'histoire” held at Cerisy-la-Salle and Bayeux in 1999, resulting from the 1982-1983 scientific analysis which accompanied its re-hanging in the new Centre Guillaume le Conquérant—a hanging that receives just criticism from a few of the volume's authors.[1]

The history of the tapestry, new chapters of which are contained within these essays, is filled with controversies; but this is only fitting, as the work itself depicts one of the most famous conflicts in European history. Part of this history is an acrimonious dispute between British and French scholars, which this volume in some measure aims to mollify. Nationalistic concerns have influenced writing on the Conquest, occasionally to the detriment of research. Sten Körner noted forty years ago that “it can be seen that there is a certain tendency to prefer the sources of one's own country, even when those sources are useless compilations of earlier accounts.”[2] Still, collaborations of such a wholehearted nature have been rare in the intervening decades. Not only does the work contain essays by scholars from both sides of the Channel, but it was also simultaneously published in French and English. This was a rather generous goodwill gesture, and should not be overlooked. It should also serve to greatly increase the readership of this French publication, both in England and in the US.

Questions surrounding the tapestry's provenance, patronage, and date have been deeply entwined with nationalistic concerns. Just where and when this work—unique at least among surviving textiles—was produced, and at whose behest, has been argued from so many angles that the debate has become worthy of a study of its own. François Neveux's “The Great Bayeux Tapestry Debate (19th-20th Centuries)” gives a sense of both of the origins and the tone of tapestry studies over the last 200 years. Her list of standard nineteenth-century questions (“Who created or commissioned the Tapestry?... When was it made?... Was the Tapestry made in Bayeux or England?”) is really not that different from the list of standard twenty-first-century questions. This volume promises to provide the final word on some of these issues, although within its own covers the debate continues from article to article. For example, Neveux's article on “The Bayeux Tapestry as Original Source” presents the work as forcefully pro-Norman: “What predominates above all is the Norman point of view” (p. 194), seconded by Marjorie Chibnall's “Orderic Vitalis and the Bayeux Tapestry,” which argues that the tapestry “present[s] the

history of the Conquest in the ‘official’ Norman version” (p. 128). This perspective—by far the dominant one at the moment—is countered to a degree in the following article by Pierre Bouet, who dares to ask, “Is the Bayeux Tapestry Pro-English?” His conclusion is rather equivocal (“neither pro-Norman nor pro-English”), but this stance is bolder than it might seem, given the prevalent belief that the tapestry is a solid work of Norman propaganda (p. 214). Indeed, Bouet presents a refreshing argument, reiterated by Maylis Baylé in “The Bayeux Tapestry and Decoration in North-Western Europe: Style and Composition.” They both argue that what we are dealing with is, in a sense, neither English nor French (and perhaps herein lies the trouble scholars have had in coming to a final consensus on the issue); rather, that the work is, as Baylé writes, “already ‘Anglo-Norman’ in so many of the elements that go to make it up” (p. 325). From a certain perspective, this Anglo-Norman publication does remain embroiled in nationalistic concerns by arriving at this conclusion, but it remains a refreshing step.

The volume is conveniently divided into five sections. As the collection is rather lengthy, many readers might prefer to focus on those areas of greatest interest. I cannot discuss each of the twenty-three essays here, and so I will focus on the five sections as units, referring to individual works when appropriate. These sections are 1) “The Historiography of the Bayeux Tapestry”; 2) “The Artefact as Textile”; 3) “Medieval Sources and Historical Narrative”; 4) “The Bayeux Tapestry as Documentary Evidence”; and 5) “The Work of Art.”

The bibliography on the tapestry is so massive that it can hardly be treated here. Indeed, in this volume, it has been granted not one or two but three separate historiographical essays, each covering a distinct historical period. This is fitting, as there have been over 500 publications on the tapestry and 100 in last ten years alone (p. 27). This is a truly daunting bibliography, and we will remain in the debt of the François Neveux, Sylvette Lemagnen, and most especially Shirley Ann Brown, who compiled in 1988 what is now the standard annotated bibliography on the subject.[3] Included as an appendix is a useful updated bibliography by Brown covering 1985-1999, although it is not annotated.

Lemagnen’s contribution merits particular note. Her essay on “The Bayeux Tapestry Under German Occupation” presents the preliminary notes for what will become an edited edition of the log-books, notes, and materials of Herbert Jankhun, head of the Nazi team in charge of studying and caring for the tapestry during the Occupation. These notes, previously believed lost, include, among other items, a ninety-five page scene-by-scene description of the tapestry and 767 detailed photographs documenting the state of the tapestry in 1941. This pioneering work will fill in a gap in the history of the work, providing information that the scholarly community had written off as lost (p. 53).

The remaining four sections seem to have been ordered such that they move from the most technical to the most interpretive. “The Artefact as Textile” provides six essays resulting from the scientific study undertaken in 1982-83, the results of which “remained confidential for too long, and so became part of Tapestry mythology ... [but] all of this is now to be remedied” (p. 67). Indeed, twenty years is rather a long wait for such information, but now this information is widely available and will no doubt be mined by scholars. This includes detailed information about—and photographs of—numerous aspects of the tapestry not often the focus of attention, including, for example, the seams joining the strips of linen together (p. 86-87), the dyes used for the woolen embroidery threads (p. 91), and the backing strip which bears modest decoration that “has hitherto escaped attention” (p. 111).

One of the volume’s greatest strengths, directly resulting from this study, is its illustrations. While there are numerous monographs currently available that provide illustrations of the full tapestry in color, including a scrollable, zoomable CD-ROM, this volume contains images not found in any of these.[4] Here, we find numerous photographs of the reverse of the tapestry, taken over the course of ten days while the backing was removed for study (p. 83). Such images reveal new information about the

process of the tapestry's construction, as well as its long and varied history. They also display the fibers in their original, rich, un-faded colors. In addition, this section contains extreme close-ups and microscopic details of fibers—interesting to all, even if only of great value to textile specialists—as well as of tears, losses, insect bites, and stains. Certainly, for those interested in process and construction, all of these will be of invaluable assistance. These images, predominantly contained in Isabelle Bédât and Béatrice Girault-Kurtzman's surprisingly readable "The Technical Study of the Bayeux Embroidery," and Gabriel Vial's "The Bayeux Embroidery and its Backing Strip," may do little to increase our understanding of the tapestry's role within its cultural context or deepen our grasp of the complex structure of the narrative, but they do combine to convey the substance of the work. For those who have not had the good fortune to visit Bayeux, these details help convey not only the content of the images, but also their texture. They make this reader feel as if he were holding the fragile, fraying linen in his hands.

Indeed, while many books seem to lack images which might be of use, this collection teeters on the verge of superfluity—certainly a testimony to the generosity of the town of Bayeux, which provided a grant toward the publication (p. 9). Still, the volume would have benefited from cross-referencing of its great store of images. Several scenes from the tapestry are mentioned in multiple articles but only illustrated in one. Simple page references would have facilitated viewing and made for a more rich visual experience for readers. An index of the images, organized by scene number, could have facilitated this process. Likewise, a topical index would have been most useful to those interested in, say, the numerous mentions scattered throughout of the depiction of Westminster Abbey, cited in several articles but not mentioned in the title of any; a student looking for such information might likely look elsewhere, rather than read the entire collection in the hopes of finding the gems buried within.

This discussion does raise the issue of audience. The preface, written by none other than the mayor of Bayeux, Patrick Gomont, suggests optimistically that this collection will be of interest "to the people of Bayeux and to the academic community at large, as well as to tourists and the wider public" (p. 9). I believe that this is aiming much too broadly. The essays, though well-illustrated, are rather specialized in nature, heavily footnoted (appropriately), and make considerable assumptions about the knowledge of their readership. There are no introductions to the key players, no overviews of the period leading up to the Conquest, no maps of Hastings, even. In short, the text is very well suited to a specialized academic audience, but lacks the appropriate apparatus for a general readership, which would be much better served by any of the dozens of general studies on the subject.

The middle section, "Medieval Sources and Historical Narrative," is perhaps the most mixed. A few of these essays do not seem very deeply connected to the tapestry, but nonetheless do help to build the cultural context in which it was created. Others grapple with the tapestry, with occasionally unsatisfying results. Neveux takes a novel and laudable approach, looking to see what information might be contained within the tapestry that is not to be found in the surviving textual accounts. On the other hand, she places more trust in the historical veracity of the visual image than I would be inclined. The so-called reality-effect of images is quite strong, but these images are by no means documentary photographs of the Conquest. Still, even photographs of military conflicts are often rather skewed, representing not history but propaganda. In regard, for example, to the presence of Odo at the "William Recognized" scene, Neveux writes that "it really would have been difficult for [the designer] totally to invent this exploit, even if he did wish to flatter the bishop. In support of this point, one must remember that the tapestry was made a very few years after the events, with many direct witnesses of the facts still alive" (p. 187). However, present and past conflicts demonstrate that those on both sides of the political spectrum manipulate images of war in order to argue for the righteousness of their causes. The presence of living witnesses is no impediment today, and was likely no impediment then. If this tapestry were hung in Odo's cathedral or in one of his supporter's halls, as has often been suggested, it seems unlikely that any would dare contradict its "facts."⁵ Indeed, military historian John France notes later

in the volume that “William brought with him a very large heavily-armed infantry contingent of whose role there are only the barest hints in the tapestry,” and that the crossbowmen are entirely missing from the work (p. 293). Certainly, the tapestry was not intended to be a fully accurate visual account of the events, and I am therefore hesitant to take it “at its word.”

The essays within “The Bayeux Tapestry as Documentary Evidence” are specific, looking at costume, architecture, and military accoutrements. Here, John France’s piece on “The Importance of the Bayeux Tapestry for the History of War” stands out, as much for his commentary on the use and misuse of the tapestry by other scholars as for his particular comments on individual elements. He notes that “the tapestry was never intended to be a picture of contemporary warfare. It presents a very partial and particular view of a long and desperate battle from which we cannot draw general conclusions about contemporary warfare” (p. 294). This observation may have broader implications for other heavily used works as well.

By far the most interesting of the essays in the final section, “The Work of Art,” is Brian Levy’s “Trifunctionality and Epic Patterning in the Bayeux Tapestry.” This is an essay not embroiled in the nineteenth-century questions laid out by Neveux, but rather concerned with broader issues of meaning. Through a nearly obsessive cataloging of triads in the tapestry, Levy presents overarching themes which may be traced through the entire work. Much of the essay does hinge on a conjectural third coronation image—a scene of William’s crowning which may well have been the logical conclusion to the work, as also argued by David Hill. Hill notes that this scene seems to have been present as late as 1729, when it appears as “a surprise ending” to Antoine Lancelot’s description of the work in his “Explication d’un monument de Guillaume le Conquérant (Tapisserie de Bayeux)” (p. 388). The essay grows increasingly complex and compelling toward the end, though the conclusion seems rather truncated. Indeed, this might be said of many of the articles in this volume. It runs over 400 pages, but contains twenty-three essays, in addition to introductory and concluding remarks and appendices. Many of the essays seem to be just reaching their stride when they arrive at their conclusions, and might be more persuasive had they been given more room. This would, perhaps, have required that a number of essays be cut from the final volume, but this might have rendered the whole stronger.

It is not always clear that later, interpretive essays have necessarily made use of the wealth of new evidence richly served up by the earlier essays, but this was no doubt the result of the publication process. Rather, it is up to the readers of this volume to sift through its copious information and ideas—some questionable but much riveting—and make careful use of all that it contains. The results of the scientific studies, the lavish photographs of portions of the tapestry normally hidden from view, and the rich context provided throughout the volume will render it of considerable interest; but its greatest value will lie, I believe, in the new research and debates it inspires.

LIST OF ESSAYS

- Patrick Gomont, “Preface”
- François Neveux, “Introduction”

Part One: Historiography of the Bayeux Tapestry

- François Neveux, “The Great Bayeux Tapestry Debate (19th-20th Centuries)”
- Shirley Ann Brown, “The Bayeux Tapestry: A Critical Analysis of Publications 1988-1999”
- Sylvette Lemagnen, “The Bayeux Tapestry under German Occupation”

Part Two: The Artefact as Textile

- Hervé Pelvillain, "Publication of Results of the Scientific and Technical Study 1982-1983"
- Nicole de Reyniès, "Bayeux Tapestry or Bayeux Embroidery?"
- Marie-Hélène Didier, "The Bayeux Tapestry: an Example of Textile Embroidery"
- Isabelle Bédard and Béatrice Girault-Kurtzeman, "The Technical Study of the Bayeux Embroidery"
- Gabriel Vial, "The Bayeux Embroidery and its Backing Strip"
- Brigitte Oger, "The Bayeux Tapestry: Results of the Scientific Tests (1982-1983)"

Part Three: Medieval Sources and Historical Narrative

- Marjorie Chibnall, "Orderic Vitalis and the Bayeux Tapestry"
- Elisabeth van Houts, "The Echo of the Conquest in the Latin Sources: Duchess Matilda, her Daughters and the Enigma of the Golden Child"
- Gillette Labory, "The Norman Conquest in the Grade Chronique de Normandie"
- François Neveux, "The Bayeux Tapestry as Original Source"
- Pierre Bouet, "Is the Bayeux Tapestry Pro-English?"
- Valerie I. J. Flint, "The Bayeux Tapestry, the Bishop and the Laity"

Part Four: The Bayeux Tapestry as Documentary Evidence

- Oliver Renaudeau, "The Bayeux Tapestry and its Depiction of Costume: The Problems of Interpretation"
- Anne-Marie Flambard Héricher, "Archaeology and the Bayeux Tapestry"
- John France, "The importance of the Bayeux Tapestry for the History of War"

Part Five: The Work of Art

- Maylis Baylé, "The Bayeux Tapestry and Decoration in North-Western Europe: Style and Composition"
- Brian J. Levy, "Trifunctionality and Epic Patterning in the Bayeux Tapestry"
- Barbara English, "The Coronation of Harold in the Bayeux Tapestry"
- David Hill, "The Bayeux Tapestry: The Establishment of a Text"
- François Neveux, "The Cerisy Colloquium: Conclusions"
- Bibliography of Bayeux Tapestry Studies: 1985-1999 by Shirley Ann Brown

NOTES

[1] Shirley Ann Brown, certainly among the most eminent of scholars on the subject, writes within a note that "it is unfortunate that the Tapestry is currently exhibited in such a way that it turns its back on itself and makes it impossible to appreciate its entirety at a glance. It is also difficult to move easily back and forth in such a way as to allow the quick referencing of one scene to another" (p. 31, n. 12). Bédard and Girault-Kurtzeman are more outspoken, writing, "We expressed our reserves about the material used (chipboard panels, jute), and about the embroidery's vertical suspension, which in our view is less satisfactory than a sloping display position" (p. 109).

[2] Sten Körner, *The Battle of Hastings, England, and Europe* (C.W.K. Gleerup: Lund, 1964).

[3] Shirley Ann Brown, *The Bayeux Tapestry: History and Bibliography* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 1988).

[4] David Wilson, *The Bayeux Tapestry* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1985), is one such standard, fully-illustrated volume. For the useful CD-ROM, with transcriptions and translations of the entire text, see Martin Kennedy Foys, *The Bayeux Tapestry* (Leicester, UK: Scholarly Digital Editions, 2003).

[5] For a discussion of possible sites for the tapestry's hanging, see Shirley Ann Brown's essay in this volume, "The Bayeux Tapestry: A Critical Analysis of Publications, 1988-1999," pp. 31-32.

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