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**George Beech**, *Was the Bayeux Tapestry Made in France? The Case for St. Florent of Saumur*. New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2005. xii + 142 pp. Map, illustrations, appendices, notes, bibliography, and index. \$69.95 U.S. (cl). ISBN 1-4039-6670-2.

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The Bayeux Tapestry is a unique survivor from the Middle Ages, an embroidery which depicts the events leading up to and culminating in the Battle of Hastings, fought in October 1066. At approximately 270 feet in length and twenty inches in height, it would have been a suitable embellishment to a late eleventh-century great hall or church nave.

In this slim volume, George Beech tackles two of the most seminal questions in Bayeux Tapestry studies: the location where the embroidery was created, and the identity of its patron. These questions have been debated, occasionally rancorously, ever since 1732 when the embroidery was first brought to public attention by the Académie des Inscriptions et Belles Lettres.

The difficulty is that there is no contemporary documentation indicating the Tapestry's origin. It is first referred to in a poem (ca.1103) by Baudri de Bourgueil, which indicates that he must have seen this embroidery in northern France.[1] There is a possibility that the Tapestry was in the possession of the Duke of Burgundy in the 1420s.[2] The first solidly documented evidence for the embroidery's whereabouts is its inclusion in the Inventory of the Treasury of Bayeux Cathedral in 1476.[3]

There is no indisputable evidence pointing to a patron for the Tapestry. During the first half of the eighteenth century, local Bayeux tradition ascribed the Tapestry to the hand of Mathilde, William of Normandy's wife, and her ladies. By 1803 English scholars had determined that the Tapestry was important for their view of British history, and it was suggested that it must have been the work of Englishwomen.[4] That started the debate which has seen many arguments for a provenance in the British Isles: Canterbury, Winchester, Worcester, Barking, Wilton, even Ireland. On the other hand, a French origin has been just as strongly proposed: Bayeux and Rouen being the favored locations. The arguments are based on evidence internal to the Tapestry itself: the linguistic nature of the Latin inscriptions, the correlation of its images with manuscript models, stitching techniques, and the interpretation of the narrative. Interestingly, the same methodologies and "evidence" are used to support both a French and an English provenance.[5]

The suggested dating for the hanging has varied from the last third of the eleventh century to the thirteenth, very often argued on the basis of similarities with written versions of the events depicted. This affects the issue of patronage. It has been suggested that, in addition to William the Conqueror's wife Mathilde, possible patrons could have been: Matilda, the wife of their son Henry I; Empress Matilda, grand-daughter of the Conqueror; or Eustace II, Count of Boulogne. Odo, Bishop of Bayeux and younger uterine half-brother of William of Normandy, has been a contender from the start of eighteenth-century scholarship because of the prominent role he plays in the presentation of the narrative. The notion of his patronage gained the high ground as early as 1824 with the publication of the opinions of H. F. Delauney.[6] With the 1957 in-depth study of the embroidery edited by Sir Frank Stenton, it was established in public opinion that the Bayeux Tapestry was created in England, probably in conjunction with St. Augustine's Abbey in Canterbury, possibly for the dedication of a rebuilt Bayeux Cathedral in 1077, and that it was commissioned by Odo, bishop of that city.

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The French capitulated gradually, and this thesis went without serious challenge until 1994 when Wolfgang Grape published a detailed study supporting his proposal that the Bayeux Tapestry was created in Bayeux under the sponsorship of Bishop Odo.[7] Very recently, Carola Hicks has floated the suggestion that the embroidery was the heart-child of Queen Edith, widow of King Edward and sister of the defeated Godwins, created in or around the nunnery at Wilton.[8]

It is into this fray that Beech has chosen to step. He puts forth the unexpected hypothesis that the Bayeux Tapestry was commissioned by none other than William the Conqueror for production at the Loire Valley monastery of St-Florent of Saumur, between 1070 and 1083. Beech, a medieval historian who has studied the documents pertaining to the early history of St-Florent for many years, accumulates his evidence in a series of progressive steps. First, he seeks to establish that the monastery had an established textile workshop in the eleventh and twelfth centuries. Then he attempts to confirm that there was a close and long-standing relationship between Duke/King William and William, abbot of St-Florent, the latter being the son and heir of Rivallon of Dol—the very Rivallon to whose aid William came when Dol was threatened by Conan of Rennes in 1064/65. Beech suggests that the inclusion of the Breton campaign as a significant part of the first section of the Bayeux Tapestry, and its decided anti-Conan stance, points to a personal intervention by Abbot William. Beech concludes the scenario by suggesting that William the Conqueror was himself the patron and that his conferring of considerable land donations in England and Normandy to St-Florent, mostly negotiated between 1070 and 1083, could have been in part his payment for the production of the Tapestry. Beech rounds out his hypothesis by pointing out that the presence of the Bayeux Tapestry at Saumur would have made it very easy for Baudri de Bourgueil, a close friend of Abbot William, to familiarize himself with the embroidery to which he refers in his 1103 poem addressed to the Countess Adèle of Blois, the Conqueror's daughter.

Beech wisely admits that most of this scenario is pure hypothesis. The *Historia Sancti Florentii* points to the existence of a St-Florent textile workshop during the early eleventh century and then again in the mid-twelfth century. The *Historia*, written at the end of the twelfth century, indicates that the abbey burned down in 1026. We cannot be certain of the status of the textile workshop between then and its described period of renewed activity in 1128-55. Beech cites nothing in the *Historia* to support the fact of a re-established textile workshop during the period 1070-83 when he suggests the Bayeux Tapestry might have been in production there. Bolstered by the mention that certain early tapestries had survived until the late twelfth century, he reasons that the lack of evidence does not disprove the probability of a continuous workshop activity. This manner of negative argument is a method that Beech will use continuously throughout his book.

As for the “close relationship” between Duke/King William and the Abbot of St-Florent, Beech admits that no documents, charters, or narratives place the two men together at the same place, at the same time. There is only the explanation, in a confirmation of a donation to St-Florent by John of Dol in the early 1080s, that King William was responding to what is interpreted as a personal appeal from Abbot William. One must ask whether or not this is strong enough evidence upon which to build the lasting personal relationship between the two Williams that Beech proposes. The number of benefices in Normandy, Brittany, and England given to St-Florent with the Conqueror's blessing indeed does indicate that the relationship was real. But a close personal relationship is not what the evidence would seem to necessarily indicate—it may simply reflect good feudal dealings. Nevertheless, Beech jumps all too easily from hypothesis to thesis. In almost the same sentence, he writes that he is simply alluding to possibilities and then states that the Conqueror “became in effect the Abbey's lay patron and protector and acquired a voice in its affairs” (p.30).

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Beech next argues that the “close relationship” between Duke/King William and Abbot William fitz Rivallon very likely lead to the King commissioning the Bayeux Tapestry from the monastery workshop, as a commemoration of the events it depicts, and that Queen Mathilda might have been involved. This would explain why William allowed endowments in England and Normandy to be given to a religious establishment so physically remote from Normandy—as payment for the undertaking. They would also serve to reward an ally in the ever on-going campaign to keep the Norman borders secure. Once again, Beech admits that there is no real evidence for this suggestion, but that it follows from the arguments that he has already made. The idea that William the Conqueror was the force behind the creation of the Bayeux Tapestry has, interestingly enough, never been seriously posited in Tapestry studies, even though it might seem to be the logical answer. The argument has always been that William was never portrayed as being the least bit interested in the “finer things of life” in any of the contemporary witnesses to his deeds and character. He was not known as a patron of learning or of art. There is no evidence that he ever owned anything resembling the Bayeux Tapestry. In fact, it is most perplexing that an undertaking as immense and complicated as the Embroidery receives absolutely no mention in any existing eleventh-century document. The Matilda connection is extremely tenuous and Beech rightly transfers that argument to an appendix.

Beech moves on to a comparison between the images in the Bayeux Tapestry and Romanesque art in western France. This type of investigation is an immense undertaking and has already yielded a number of studies, including the latest investigation of Maylis Baylé.[9] The end result is that the art seen in the Embroidery can be placed squarely in the artistic tradition of eleventh-century northern Europe, and includes a heavy dose of Scandinavian elements. Beech urges future investigators to include the Loire Valley and central France in this investigation, acknowledging that his results were rather scanty. His reopening of the argument that the early eleventh-century Leiden manuscript of Adémar of Chabannes’ copy of Aesop’s fables be looked at as a probable source for the fabliaux and other images in the Tapestry should not be dismissed out-of-hand. Even though many of the images he cites as corresponding to the Tapestry images can also be seen in Canterbury manuscripts, it would be worth investigating what the relationship among the manuscripts themselves might be.

Chapter five, at twenty-seven pages, is the longest in the book. Beech sees the Bayeux Tapestry as a catalyst for the endowments which the abbey of St-Florent received from Duke/King William, with the earlier Breton campaign being the key. To support this hypothesis, Beech provides a detailed discussion of the Tapestry’s narrative of the campaign which then-Duke William undertook against Conan of Rennes in 1064. He compares the Embroidery’s version with that in William of Poitiers’ *Gesta Guillelmi*. The inclusion of the pertinent Latin text, with English translation, here and in other parts of the book, is a welcome support not seen often enough in publications. Beech concludes that the Tapestry’s designer produced a more accurate and complete account since, being at St-Florent, he was closer to and more familiar with the part of Brittany in question (p. 62). He suggests that the Tapestry’s narrative, culminating in Conan’s surrender at Dinan (contrary to William of Poitiers who states that there was no final solution), is best understood as expressing the viewpoint of the lords of Dol who were seeking to justify their support of Duke William of Normandy—Abbot William was the heir of Rivallon of Dol before he entered the monastery (p. 87). While admitting that proof is lacking, Beech sees the designer as drawing mainly on local Breton sources for his information, and that the anti-Conan flavor of the Tapestry’s version supports his hypothesis of St-Florent as the center of its design and production. This is an ingenious interpretation of this narrative sequence. Most scholars have explained it as propaganda to establish Duke William’s effective authority prior to his invasion of England, and as an opportunity to highlight the subservient position in which Harold Godwinsson is placed. Although there is much in Beech’s interpretation that is appealing, the difficulty is that he isolates the Breton campaign from the rest of the Tapestry’s narrative. It is accepted that the embroidery creates a seamless narrative in which each event is intimately connected with the whole, and Beech’s scenario lacks a larger purpose for the inclusion of the campaign story. It is hard to accept the possibility that such an extensive section of the

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Tapestry would be dedicated to pleasing someone as unconnected with the conquest of England as the abbot of St-Florent.

Beech then suggests that the presence of the Tapestry at St-Florent would explain how Baudri de Bourgueil, whose monastery was a mere twenty-five kilometers distant, could have seen the embroidery at his leisure as it was being created, leading to his writing his poem to Adèle. Andrew Bridgeford has suggested another possibility: the Tapestry, made in England, commissioned by Eustace of Boulogne, for presentation to Odo of Bayeux, might have been taken by the bishop to Clermont in 1095 when he attended the meeting in which Pope Urban II pronounced the First Crusade. Baudri de Bougueil was also there and this could have been how he became familiar with the Embroidery.[10] This highlights the fact that there are many possibilities to consider when facing the questions of the Tapestry's early history—all is open to speculation.

In the final chapter, Beech attempts to satisfy skeptics who are convinced that there are close links between the Bayeux Tapestry images and models found in Canterbury manuscripts. He suggests that the designer would not have hesitated to glean his images from his knowledge of art in different areas of France, and even England. He postulates that the close ties between St-Florent and its southern English holdings (Andover and Bramber in particular), along with the continuing friendship between Abbot William of St-Florent and Abbot Scotland of St Augustine's Canterbury, would have encouraged the interchange of artistic models: perhaps Canterbury monks journeyed to Saumur with their manuscripts; perhaps the designer, from Saumur, could have gathered his visual material from the Canterbury manuscripts, and assembled the Tapestry's cartoon in St-Florent. Or, as an alternative, Beech concedes that the Tapestry could have been designed at Canterbury but was embroidered at Saumur. This last is too cumbersome to seriously contemplate.

Beech presents his conclusions as hypotheses, worthy of further investigation and consideration. On the other hand, he certainly set the cat among the pigeons when he stated, in the Louvre catalogue for "La France Romane", that there is evidence to suggest that the Bayeux Tapestry originated in St-Florent de Saumur in the Loire Valley. To make matters more provocative, the Tapestry is given an "Anjou (?), avant 1082" provenance.[11]

Many Tapestry scholars, who have drawn their own arguments from the acceptance of an English provenance for the Tapestry and Odo as patron, will be tempted to dismiss Beech's arguments out-of-hand. One can pick holes in Beech's method, particularly in his rather weak comparisons of the Tapestry images with later Loire Valley sculpture. One can question his interpretation of the documents which he uses to support his hypotheses. His suggestion that the project may have been split between Canterbury and Saumur is unwieldy. He does not account for Anglicisms in the Latin text or Scandinavian elements in the designs. He constantly shifts between unprovable hypothesis and definite statement. Each of his arguments seems to have some merit, but when all the elements are brought together, one wonders if the whole really is the sum of the parts.

One can question whether this study should have been published in book form. It would have benefitted from hard editing to limit the repetition and summarizing. It might have been more palatable in the form of an extended journal article. But in spite of this, when all is said and done, George Beech has rendered an unexpected service to Bayeux Tapestry studies. This little book has revitalized the seminal arguments about the origins of one of the most important artworks from the Middle Ages. Beech has a talent for ferreting out documents and the wealth of information that he has provided should spur scholars to a deeper study of the questions and possibilities that he raises. This after all, is the stated purpose for his book. I would like to suggest an investigation of the possibility that the abbey of St Nicolas in Bramber, a St-Florent holding established in 1073 and not too distant from Canterbury,

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might have had something to do with the production of the Bayeux Tapestry. If there is any possibility of this being the case, it would bring together the disparate elements of the Angevin, Breton, Anglo-Norman, and Scandinavian elements seen in the Bayeux Embroidery. Then it would truly reflect the diversity of the world over which William of Normandy held sway. But as always, with Bayeux Tapestry studies, we find ourselves in the land of hypothesis.

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## NOTES

[1] “The *Adelae Comitissae* of Baudri of Bourgueil and the Bayeux Tapestry”, *Anglo-Norman Studies XVI. Proceedings of the Battle Conference 1993* (Woodbridge, Suffolk: The Boydell Press, 1994). Co-authored with Michael W. Herren, pp. 55-73, reprinted in R. Gameson, ed., *The Study of the Bayeux Tapestry* (Woodbridge, Suffolk: The Boydell Press, 1997), pp. 139-55.

[2] Paris, Bibliothèque nationale: Collection des Cinq Cent de Colbert, T. 127, fol. 127v; this Inventory was first published by le Comte de Laborde, *Les ducs de bourgogne. Études sur les lettres, les arts et l'industrie pendant le XV<sup>e</sup> siècle et plus particulièrement dans les pays bas et le duché de Bourgogne* (Paris, 1857) II, p. 270; and recently by Anna Rapp Buri and Monica Stucki-Schurer, *Burgundische Tapissereien* (München: Hirmer, 2001), p. 460. George Beech has a forthcoming study in which he posits that the Bayeux Tapestry was in French/Burgundian hands for a large part of the 15th century.

[3] Caen, Archives départementales--Calvados: Manuscrits du Chapitre de la cathédrale de Bayeux. *L'inventaire du trésor de la cathédrale de Bayeux, 1476*. See Ms. 199, item 262.

[4] S. L. “Letter concerning Queen Matilda’s Tapestry”, *Gentleman’s Magazine*, series 1, vol.73 (Supplement, 1803): 1225-1226.

[5] For the extensive bibliography of the Bayeux Tapestry, see Shirley Ann Brown, *The Bayeux Tapestry: History and Bibliography* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 1988), and subsequently in Shirley Ann Brown, “Recherches sur la Broderie de Bayeux: Bibliographie 1985-1999”/ “Bibliography of Bayeux Tapestry Studies: 1985-1999”, in Pierre Bouet, Brian J. Levy and François Neveux, eds., *L’Art de broder l’Histoire: La Tapissierie de Bayeux/ The Bayeux Tapestry: Embroidering the Facts of History* (Caen: Presses universitaire de Caen, 2004), pp. 411-18.

[6] Honoré François Delauney, *Origine de la Tapissierie de Bayeux prouvée par elle-même* (Caen: Mancel, 1824).

[7] Wolfgang Grape, *The Bayeux Tapestry, Monument to a Norman Triumph* (Munich and New York: Prestel, 1994).

[8] Carola Hicks, *The Bayeux Tapestry. The Life Story of a Masterpiece* (London: Chatto & Windus, 2006), pp. 29-39.

[9] Maylis Baylé, “La Tapissierie de Bayeux et l’ornementation dans l’Europe du Nord-Ouest: Questions de stylistique et de composition”/“The Bayeux Tapestry and Decoration in North-Western Europe: Style and Composition”, in Pierre Bouet, Brian J. Levy and François Neveux, eds., *L’Art de broder l’Histoire: La Tapissierie de Bayeux/ The Bayeux Tapestry: Embroidering the Facts of History* (Caen: Presses universitaire de Caen, 2004), pp. 303-325.

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[10] Andrew Bridgeford, 1066: *The Hidden History of the Bayeux Tapestry* (London & New York: Fourth Estate, 2004), pp. 220-21.

[11] *La France romane au temps des premiers Capétiens (987-1152)* (Paris: Hazan, 2005). See in particular item 256, pp. 334-5.

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