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WAS THE BAYEUX TAPESTRY  
MADE IN FRANCE?

THE CASE FOR SAINT-FLORENT  
OF SAUMUR

*George Beech*



WAS THE BAYEUX TAPESTRY MADE IN FRANCE?

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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Only after I had finished this book did I mention it to friends and colleagues, hence I cannot here name those to whom I am grateful for advice and criticism other than my wife. Having never before dealt with the Bayeux Tapestry in my writings, I could not be sure that the hypothesis I am proposing was soundly based and plausible until I had developed my argument in detail and at length. At earlier stages I anticipated reactions of stupor and disbelief at my challenging something as venerable as the beliefs of the Canterbury school, so I decided to remain silent about it. At the same time I came to understand why the tapestry scene of Harold saving Normand soldiers from the river near Mont Saint-Michel had exercised a special fascination over me. Wading carelessly into attractive waters can be dangerous if quicksands lurk beneath, and more than once I wondered if I wasn't succumbing to such a temptation.

Since completion of this book I have profited from discussions following talks I gave on it at Kalamazoo, Paris, Strasbourg, Ithaca (New York), and Saumur, but above all I am indebted to the publications of generations of scholars who have laid the indispensable foundations for the study of the Bayeux Tapestry. And Michel Mouate and Lisette Bellaÿche of Saumur were of great help to me during my visits to the site of the abbey of Saint-Florent.



## PREFACE

Those who are dazzled by the size and the beauty of the Bayeux Tapestry and by the grandeur of its depiction of the 1066 Conquest of England by Duke William of Normandy, are often unaware of the mystery surrounding its origins. The problem comes from the fact that the tapestry itself does not identify who ordered it, for whom, or when and where it was made. Complicating the affair is a second fact, that the tapestry is not mentioned by any other contemporary source, with the possible exception of a poem of about 1100. The first undisputed reference to it comes from an inventory of Bayeux cathedral of 1476, about 400 years after its production. As a consequence everything that can be known about the above questions, that is, origin, commissioner, date, place, has to be inferred from the tapestry itself.

In this book I present a new hypothesis about who commissioned the Bayeux Tapestry and where it was produced (although it is an embroidery it is commonly referred to as a tapestry) which differs in both substance and approach from what earlier scholars have written on the subject. Almost all previous inquiries into its origins have been by historians seeking to establish an English place of origin on the basis of artistic similarities between its figures, buildings, scenes, and the like, and those in illuminated manuscripts known to have come from English abbeys. My argument concentrates on written records of the time, particularly charters and historical narratives, in a search for the setting, the circumstances, the people, their personal relationships, and the issues involved in the commissioning and production of this magnificent work of art. Still, even though half of my narrative is a commentary on textual sources, I believe that some of the most persuasive evidence favoring my hypothesis comes from a new analysis of a single episode in the tapestry, the so-called Breton campaign. This is not art historical in nature but a study of the way in which the artist presented his story, and it persuaded me that this part of tapestry is best understood as a reflection of a political controversy among the aristocracy of northeastern Brittany just prior to the Conquest.

Proposing a Loire valley origin for the tapestry, and (a second element in my hypothesis) that William the Conqueror himself ordered the tapestry,

not as is widely believed at present, his brother Odo, bishop of Bayeux, runs against all established orthodoxy at the present time. No one has ever considered such possibilities. Nonetheless I believe the evidence in its favor is sufficiently persuasive that it deserves further consideration and testing.

It was in the course of looking into the history of the abbey of Saint-Florent of Saumur in the Loire valley that I learned that in the eleventh century it had an active textile workshop with contacts overseas. My attention perked up when I confirmed my supposition that the place of origin of the Bayeux Tapestry still had not been decisively determined, though artistic evidence favored England; R. Gameson, *The Study of the Bayeux Tapestry*, 1997. Reading the article of S. Brown and M. Herren in that same volume, to the effect that Baudri of Bourgueil had to have known and studied the Bayeux Tapestry at leisure in order to have written his poem to the Countess Adèle, only heightened my interest because of the proximity of his abbey to that of Saint-Florent. I had long known of Saint-Florent possessions in Normandy and England through publication of the relevant charters in the later nineteenth century, but no one had ever suggested any connection had existed between that abbey and William the Conqueror, his half-brother, or anyone presumed involved in the commissioning and production of the tapestry. Nor had any of the scholars of the tapestry been aware of the Saint-Florent luxury cloth production or mentioned it in their writings. When free from other commitments I decided to explore further in the Saint-Florent records to see if they contained any traces of contacts between the abbey and Duke/King William. Finding that indeed they did, gradually led to the formulation of the hypothesis which is expressed in the title of this book: Was the Bayeux Tapestry Made in France? The Case for Saint-Florent of Saumur. I then decided to go ahead and test it, and this book is the result.