

After 950 years stunning tapestry ‘comes home’

Is the world’s most famous embroidery actually British? As France today confirms the loan of the Bayeux Tapestry, an age-old debate has revived over who made the miraculous masterpiece.



One in the eye: Historians argue about whether the victim (above and left) really is Harold.

He has bestowed a horse on the president of China, invited Vladimir Putin to a palace and Donald Trump to a parade. But Emmanuel Macron is about to announce his most spectacular diplomatic gift yet.

The Bayeux Tapestry is coming to England for the first time in its 950-year existence. Macron will announce that the relic will go on display in Britain in 2020 during his visit to the UK this week. It comes after months of negotiations.

The 70 metre long tapestry (technically an embroidery) depicts arguably the key turning point in English history: the Norman conquest, culminating in the Battle of Hastings, where William of Normandy defeated the Saxon king, Harold II, and soon after became William I.

Historians have long debated its origins, but it was probably commissioned in the 1070s by the half-brother of William the Conqueror — Bishop Odo of Bayeux.

For much of the 20th century it was maintained that it was created in France.

Certain clues give credence to this: the type of wine barrels depicted are typical of Normandy, and some of the text was written in Norman dialect, such as “Bagias” for Bayeux and “Wilgelmum” for William.

But not everyone accepts this view. William made Odo the Earl of Kent shortly after conquering Britain, basing him permanently in Britain. Many historians now believe it was made in Canterbury by English women with instruction from a Norman soldier who had fought at Hastings, as the level of detail would have been impossible to achieve without an eyewitness account.

Yet wherever it was made, the subject matter is undoubtedly of more importance to the English than to the French. Had the Saxons won at Hastings, the English language would be completely different. Britain’s class structure would be unrecognisable. Elizabeth II would not be queen.

There are thousands of priceless foreign artefacts standing in British museums. Since the 1980s Greece has

urged Britain to return the Elgin Marbles, and the cause is supported by many in Britain. Should attention now return to bringing the Bayeux Tapestry “home” for good?

Entente cordiale

The subject matter of the tapestry changed Britain forever, so keeping it in Britain would permit better appreciation and understanding, say some. If it was indeed made by forced English labour, the argument is even stronger. France had it for 950 years; now it should be Britain’s turn for the next millennium.

Don’t be ridiculous, reply others. Demanding that Britain keeps the tapestry would trigger a totally unnecessary diplomatic row. It would be the height of rudeness in response to Macron’s gesture. And if we apply that logic equally, Britain’s museums would soon be very dull places indeed.

YOU DECIDE

1. Should Britain keep the Bayeux Tapestry permanently?
2. Is the Norman Conquest the most important event in British history?

Q & A

Q: What do we know?

A: Very little for certain about the tapestry's origins. We know that the first written record of it is from 1476 when it was recorded in the cathedral treasury at Bayeux as "a very long and narrow hanging on which are embroidered figures and inscriptions comprising a representation of the conquest of England".

Q: What do we not know?

A: As there are very few primary sources for the Battle of Hastings, the Bayeux Tapestry forms much of our current impression of it. It is not clear which figure is the king under the words "Harold is killed." It may in fact be some other man who is shown being hit in the eye. Others have speculated that this was added to the tapestry at a later date. Nor do we know what else the tapestry once contained, since some bits were given away as souvenirs.

ACTIVITIES

1. Split into groups, and come up with five things that would be different about Britain and the world had the Saxons won the Battle of Hastings.
2. Design an illustration of a scene from modern times in the style of the Bayeux Tapestry.

WORD WATCH

Horse – On a state visit to China this month, Macron arrived with a horse called Vésuve de Brekka. It had previously belonged to the elite French Republic Guard, whose horses had caught Xi Jinping's eye on a visit to Paris in 2014.

Embroidery – A tapestry is woven on a loom whereas an embroidery has what is known as a "ground fabric" on which threads are sewn or embroidered to form a picture.

Language – Fifty-eight per cent of all English words come from French or Latin and often a mixture of the two, although the most commonly used words remain Germanic.

Class structure – Many Saxon nobles were either killed at Hastings or were dispossessed soon after William became king as he implemented a new aristocracy in Britain.

Elgin Marbles – Part of the Parthenon Marbles, they are a set of sculptures created in the 5th century BC as decoration for the Parthenon, the most important surviving building of classical Greece. They are named after Lord Elgin, who obtained them from Greece.

SOME PEOPLE SAY...

"It is certainly the work of amateurs; very feeble amateurs."

Charles Dickens
What do you think?

BECOME AN EXPERT

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