

THE PERJURY AT BAYEUX.

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The famous embroidery at Bayeux, besides being an historical document of importance, is also a work of art, and in this aspect I have long studied it. I was lately reminded of it in reading the Itinerary of Henry I, given in recent numbers of the *English Historical Review*, and I venture to put some slight suggestions on record, although I am writing away from books, and even without my notes. From the Itinerary it appears that about 1100 the kings crossed to Normandy from either Portsmouth or Southampton, and stayed at some neighbouring manor before embarking. Now Bosham, which Harold visited immediately before his adventures in Normandy, would have been a perfectly suitable starting point if he had intended to visit duke William at Rouen, a purpose which has been denied by English chroniclers.¹ Such an intention, however, agrees perfectly with the story as presented on the 'tapestry.' The drama there begins with Harold and his party riding away after an audience with the feeble old king Edward. It is the suggestion of the 'tapestry' in the language of art that Harold departed from king Edward on a mission of state.

The prominence of bishop Odo in the events depicted on the 'tapestry' has often been noticed, but all the implications of this and kindred facts have never been drawn out. A principal scene on the 'tapestry' is that where Harold takes the oath over the shrine of relics in Bayeux cathedral. A series of subjects well in the centre of the work deals with Harold's part in the Breton campaign, which was the occasion of his presence at Bayeux. The object of depicting this subject was to amplify the Bayeux episode, to show how well Harold was treated by duke William, and to make his guilt the plainer. This is

¹ See Prof. Oman's *England before the Norman Conquest*.

the centre of interest in the pictured drama, and the crucial incident is the oath on the relics of Bayeux. Harold's false swearing and what came of it is really the subject matter of the story-design.

It has been a matter for comment that a subject like the Conquest of England should have been selected for the adornment of Bayeux cathedral, but this great historical event was seen clerically. As treated here it became God's judgement on the oath at Bayeux; and thus it was a sacred subject. The Pope had blessed the punitive expedition: it was a crusade. The prominence of Odo need occasion no surprise, for in this other aspect he was almost the protagonist and duke William was but the lay instrument of the judgement of God. Again it has been supposed that the tapestry is incomplete and that the pictured story would have gone on to show William seated on Edward's throne. Such a completion, however, belonged rather to the other story. It would not have been exactly out of place here, perhaps; but it would be anti-climax to Harold's terrible doom and those stark corpses. The drama falls into two great divisions, the crime and the punishment, and these into minor parts such as: Harold's embassy from King Edward; the visit to Bayeux and the oath on the Relics; the sign of God's anger by the comet and William's preparation; the battle, the pope's banner and Harold's dreadful end. The banner with the cross seems to have remained the standard of the Norman kings until the lions were assumed.

The embroidery was a hanging brought out for the cathedral festivals, especially the feast of Relics. It showed how their sanctity had been vindicated by speedy judgement, and was a warning against any perjury like in kind, however different in degree. The psychological background from which the treatment of the story was projected thus becomes plain. The scheme of subjects was doubtless suggested by Odo himself or under his immediate directions.

The artistic design and workmanship are English, and, I have no doubt, Winchester work. Winchester at the time of the Conquest was the centre of a great school of art which had been fostered and indeed re-founded by one who should be our national hero—the

strong and wise Englishman Alfred. It was famous for painted books, goldsmiths' work and embroidery. It is said that queen Matilda, in her will, bequeathed certain vestments, the work of an embroiderer of Winchester. Possibly he was the chief artist concerned in the working of the Bayeux embroidery.

Since the above notes were written, I have seen a new book on the Bayeux 'tapestry,' by M. A. Levé, in which I find these words: 'The veritable subject is the perjury of Harold and his terrible chastisement . . . so the drama had the character of high morality suitable for its place in the cathedral.' What I have said, therefore, has been anticipated in print; but my conclusion was reached on independent grounds, and will have the secondary value of a coincidence.