

The Bayeux tapestry A moving picture of war as it really is

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It is a miracle of cooperation across borders that brings two cultures together and reveals they are the same, after all. I'm not talking about the news this week that France's president has given the go-ahead for the Bayeux tapestry to visit Britain. I am describing the tapestry itself.



It comes to something when we have to turn to the early middle ages for lessons in compassion and how to be Europeans. The tapestry was created in a world of near-universal illiteracy and tiny life expectancies, a remote time when a comet passing in the sky was a sign from God. In 1066 the Normans invaded England. Their leader, Duke William, seized the crown after killing his AngloSaxon rival Harold Godwinson at the Battle of Hastings. Very soon after that a more than 70-metre long comic strip was created that tells the story of the Norman invasion in bold, embroidered images that reveal one subtle detail after another to create a moving picture (in every sense) of what war is really like.

All great historical events are complex. Modern historians can tell you that, and the Bayeux tapestry shows it. The incredible thing about this apparently primitive work made so long ago is it shows the truth from multiple points of view, with respect for the losers as well as winners.

“It’s a fantastic example of the making of history,” says Simon Schama, the writer and broadcaster, awed by the storytelling skills. “My favourite bit is where the embroiderers abolish the borders at the point where

the armada sails so you have this extension in space, creating the sense of an infinite flotilla. There's also a couple having it off. And peasants in the border pulling the hauberks off the dead."

It all starts with a holiday gone wrong. Perhaps the trip the Anglo-Saxon noble Harold takes to Normandy in the early scenes of the tapestry is more business than pleasure, but whatever his plans, they are wrecked. He ends up a "guest" of Duke William, who gets him to swear an oath of loyalty. Harold has to stand with his hands on two reliquary caskets. William sits on his throne, the image of a king. He points to the relics in an acutely cinematic image of smouldering power. Already the question hits you: whose side are the artists on? This is no simple propaganda image. Harold is portrayed just as sensitively as William. If anything, we're on Harold's side.

Schama believes the tapestry was commissioned by Odo, bishop of Bayeux and half-brother to William. After the Norman victory at Hastings, Odo was made Earl of Kent, giving him access to "Europe's greatest embroiderers". The style of Kent's craftspeople has been detected in the bright wool. Chances are it is their work and, in its most subversive moments, their vision.

Ambivalence runs subtly like a thread through this richly told story. If it only showed the Normans building castles when they land in England, that would be impressive propaganda. Yet it also shows them burning a house – not such a good look. The Anglo-Saxons are portrayed fighting bravely. Harold's death is given tragic pathos. Schama thinks this even-handed quality underlines "the sense the embroiderers are bound to be English". This is where the Bayeux tapestry becomes an embodiment of its living complexity. It is both a Norman brag and a Saxon lament.

This is a wise, tolerant work of art that sees no need to insult the weak or make gods of the strong. "It's so much about Englishness or Britishness and at the same time how that is rooted in Normanness," marvels Schama. At a time when our relationship with Europe is being remade – or just plain broken – here is a document of how interwoven that relationship is.

The story behind Macron's daring cultural gesture also has an intricate weave. It started in the British Museum, which is probably where the tapestry will be shown in 2022, if scientific tests confirm it can travel. Under its current director, Hartwig Fischer, and his predecessor, Neil MacGregor, this museum has developed an ideal of "cultural diplomacy", the use of museums

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Historian

and their treasures to open doors between nations. Now it's doing that for Brexit Britain by bringing our European story home to us.

In 2013 Michael Lewis, the museum's deputy head of Britain, Europe and prehistory, joined a committee to help plan a gallery in Bayeux for the town's treasure. As he sat on this committee he got an idea. What would happen to the tapestry when its space was being rebuilt? Lewis began talking to his colleagues in Bayeux about the possibility of lending it to Britain. These talks developed until they were taken to civil service levels. Then suddenly the French president stepped in.

But of course Macron deserves the credit, Lewis insists. The president saw its potential, cut through red tape and has used his authority to make a medieval dream come true. Fischer agrees, saying Macron is "extremely aware of what constitutes Europe through history. What are the ideas that have shaped Europe? What is the shared heritage? If you read his speech in Athens last year, he seems to be aware of the role culture plays."

Macron gave that speech on the ancient Pnyx hill in Athens and delivered part of it in Greek. Fischer does not, however, see any analogy between the tapestry and the Parthenon marbles, the treasure of the British Museum whose return Greece has so long demanded. Britain does not claim to own the Bayeux tapestry, he points out. Is he sure? After speaking to him, I see this headline: "The Bayeux tapestry's English. If the French want it back they'll have to invade!" Which seems a bit premature.

Yet any attempt to twist the Bayeux tapestry into petty patriotism looks desperate. This masterpiece is, says Fischer, “about exchange. It makes you aware of how national borders come out of a long process.”

So, there you have it – the tapestry is coming to Britain in a remainder plot hatched at the ultra-liberal British Museum. 1066 is where British history starts in many minds. Thinking about it means thinking about who the British are. If you look at the tapestry with both eyes open the answers to that can be seen.

It’s true we are an island. Yet to look at those embroidered ships with their multicoloured sails is to see the richness of the foreign, the different. The tapestry is a mix of threads. The true flag of Europe.