Summary

Sylvia Ulrich: The Bayeux Tapestry. An 11th century artwork and its significance as source material for medieval archaeology.

The Bayeux Tapestry: Introduction
The Bayeux Tapestry (surviving length 68.50 m.) depicts the historic Battle of Hastings, which took place on October 14th 1066 AD, as well as the conquest of England by the Normans under William the Conqueror. Even though the term “Bayeux Tapestry” (a name that can be cited as early as the 18th century) has become widely accepted, both in scholarship and among interested laymen, it is not technically a tapestry since the images are not woven, but embroidered. Yet the common term “Tapestry” will be used throughout this thesis.

Miscellaneous coloured threads were used to apply the motifs onto the linen cloth. These motifs are bordered by figurative depictions and accompanied by explanatory Latin inscriptions. There is no judgmental or moralizing content within the descriptions. They only serve as a support for the motifs, elucidating the events as they are depicted. There is debate about the commissioner of the Tapestry, but it is likely to be the Norman bishop Odo of Bayeux (1032-1097), the half-brother of Duke William. The most decisive reason for this assumption is the popular characterization of Odo on the Bayeux Tapestry, where he appears both as a secular and a clerical man of high rank. The identification of Odo as commissioner allows a closer dating of the Tapestry. The *terminus post quem* and *terminus ante quem* are given by the events depicted (1066), and the year of Odo’s death (1097). It is not yet possible to date the Tapestry to a particular year, but a closer look at the biographical history of Odo, as well as some other factors (others’ supposed involvement in the origination of the Bayeux Tapestry), are helpful in this aspect. Thus one can safely fix the tapestry’s origin to somewhere between 1072 (the year of Bishop Odo’s imprisonment in Rouen) and 1082 (the year of his subsequent deportation).

The majority of modern researchers consider Canterbury, Kent, to be the point of origin of the Bayeux Tapestry. In Odo’s time Canterbury was the ecclesiastical and cultural centre of the country, and the abbey of St. Augustine (founded around 597), which is the assumed place of production of the Tapestry, was in good contact with the Bishop of Bayeux. Also, there are stylistic parallels between the Bayeux Tapestry and the St. Augustine gospel (6th century) which are indicative of this conclusion. A Norman origin for the tapestry, which was a popular assumption in past studies, can be negated by stylistic comparisons (e.g.
Anglicisms in the inscriptions and the implicit lack of legitimisation regarding the Norman invasion).

The history of the Bayeux Tapestry

The fine preservation of the Bayeux Tapestry is astonishing, especially when its age and the textile material are taken into consideration. But when bearing in mind the eventful “biography” of the tapestry it is even more astonishing that there has not been more damage. There is evidence that the Tapestry was hung round the nave of the Bayeux Cathedral as long ago as 1476. There it was exhibited at the annual Feast of Relics, taking place between July 1st and July 8th. In more recent history under both Napoleon Bonaparte (at the beginning of the 19th century) and during the rise of National Socialism (first half of the 20th century) the embroidery had been misused as a propaganda tool to legitimate ancestry and ideology. Particularly between 1939 and 1945 the Bayeux Tapestry was exposed to various dangers caused by the Forschungsgemeinschaft Deutsches Ahnenerbe e.V. under the guidance of Reichsführer-SS Heinrich Himmler, whose stated aim was to prove the German origin of the artwork.

The historical background

Comparatively, the events depicted on the Bayeux Tapestry show historical contradictions to data gained from written sources of the 11th and 12th century. One example of this is the oath on the Bayeux relics that is made by Harold. There is no doubt that the scene takes place in Bayeux, since the location is mentioned in the inscription. Conversely, written sources describe different scenes associated with the oath. In the Gesta Guillelmi ducis Normannorum et regis Anglorum (written between 1071 and 1077) of William of Poitiers for example, the oath is taken in Bonneville-sur-Touques, while it is Rouen in The Ecclesiastical History of Orderic Vitalis (12th century). There are several conjectures concerning the transfer of the scene to Bayeux. It is likely that the artist wanted to emphasise the significance and the rank of these relics, to set Harold’s following perjury into direct moral context with his defeat in the Battle of Hastings.

The chronological course of events on the Bayeux Tapestry is not in all cases historically correct. The events depicted seem to succeed each other more closely than it was actually the case. Due to the lack of dates in the inscriptions it is impossible to create a precise chronology. The representation of Halley’s Comet is an example for the wrong arrangement of happenings on the Tapestry. Looking at the embroidery, the comet seems to be visible over England in January 1066, on the day of the coronation of Harold. Modern astronomical investigations of the astronomer Dr. Donald K. Yeomans of the Jet Propulsion Laboratory (California Institute of Technology), which were published in April 2007, show that Halley’s
Comet was not visible over Asia and Europe before March, and gained optimal visibility on April, 24th 1066. It is assumed that this was no mistake of the artist, but that the “fatal” character of the comet was used as a bad omen to obtain a more dramatic effect for the forthcoming events.

The archaeological significance of the Bayeux Tapestry

Books that dealt with the Bayeux Tapestry in the past have, for the most part, been generalised research on dating, provenance, and thematic representations. Archaeological attempts can usually only be found in articles on specific finds of the 11th century, weapons for example, which use the Tapestry only as a additional and comparative source. The Archaeological Authority of the Bayeux Tapestry of Michael John Lewis, released in 2005, was the first profound archaeological paper that also included verification of sources. Previous publications used the Tapestry as a primary source for various types of artefacts of the 11th century, but most of them lack a sufficient critical attitude.

It is given that verification of sources has to be used on iconographic sources, too. In the case of the Bayeux Tapestry there are particular questions concerning the imagination of the artist and potential topoi, but it is also the relatively small size of the embroidery that should not be underestimated when it comes to questions of detail. The investigation of proper comparative finds was sometimes difficult, especially concerning characteristic details, as we can find them in the group of everyday objects. Items that can be directly related to the depictions on the Tapestry, like weapons and equipment used in the Battle of Hastings, are unfortunately not preserved. There have not been in-depth excavations on the battlefield in Battle, East Sussex, where the Battle of Hastings took place, only two chance discoveries are known. In 1935 human remains were discovered near St. Mary’s Church, which is located in the ancient battlefield area, but they decomposed during the exposure. Eventually it was

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possible to save a battle axe in 1951 in immediate proximity to the battlefield, which is now kept in the Battle Museum of Local History³.

**Weaponry**

Since the pictured military equipment on the Bayeux Tapestry can be aligned with real objects in many cases, the embroidery can be seen as an authentic source in this field. But there is one problem concerning the chronological placement of the weapons and armour depicted: they are often earlier types such as the three-lobed pommels, which were particularly common in the 9th and 10th century. Another example is the illustration of the bow which is small on the Tapestry, though the small bow was already superseded by the longbow in the 11th century. There are also elements that have been borrowed from contemporary art, as can be seen in the case of the trousered hauberks. The depicted helmets with nasal guard, as well as the kite-shields constitute an exception. Here a development within the weaponry can be tracked, that actually took place in the 11th century. Especially the fact that the nasal guard can not be found in illuminations before the 12th century, which means the artist can not have borrowed this element from art, is indicative for the depiction of an actual common form. Altogether it can be said that the artist certainly drew his inspiration in part from art objects, but he also pictured the weaponry of the contemporary warrior, which he maybe even have known of first hand. We can not be sure in which proportion this happened, for various components like the small wings of some spears, are common both in 11th century artwork and in the archaeological record.

The variety in the depictions of the arms of offence of the Norman and the English army are small. Swords for example show no characteristics that allow an assignment to one of the involved armies. The equipment of the English with battle axes is an attribute that can be found in various other sources, but it should be pointed out that the artist used this specific weapon to identify the English warriors in the battle. It is therefore highly doubtful whether the Normans did not use the battle axe at all, or if it merely was not depicted due to this differentiation.

³ Email-Correspondence with F. Carver (I.T. Development Battle Museum), 17.12.2008.
There is a similar problem regarding the defensive arms. The round-shield\(^4\) is depicted on the Bayeux Tapestry as part of the English equipment, but was certainly also used by the Normans. It must be assumed that this differentiation was utilised in favour of visual clarification, in this case the distinction between the two armies. This assumption is verified by other contemporary sources that deal with the Battle of Hastings, and where no such differentiation of weaponry can be detected.

Regarding the large number of helmets and hauberks on the embroidery, a significant deviation both to contemporary written sources and to the archaeological record can be noticed. Whereas written sources describe these parts of armament as highly valuable and reserved for the military elite, almost all soldiers on the Tapestry are armed with helmet and hauberk. It is hardly probable that this was the case, but rather that only soldiers of higher ranks, like the English *Housecarls*, the bodyguards of the king, had access to such armour, while the remaining army had to do with simple padded garments.

**Clothing**

Excavated textile fragments are suitable for material analyses and for verifying manufacturing techniques, but they do give little information on the original appearance of the garment itself. Iconography can be very helpful to answer this question. The Bayeux Tapestry turned out to be a good source of information, since it mainly depicts the actual clothing of the late 11\(^{th}\) century (except for details like ornaments and jewellery). There are both “archaic” elements like the Phrygian caps, and parts of the typical late Anglo-Saxon dress, for example formal ecclesiastical dress. Besides, there are indications of changes and innovations within fashion that serve as the primary clue for the authenticity of the Tapestry.

\(^4\) Round-shields are depicted in a convex form on the BT, presumably to ensure a better side-view. Archaeological finds, e.g. from the Gokstad-ship (Norway, around 900), show that the round-shield was flat. This form was advantageous, since the stroke of the opponent was not channeled against the shield-bearer, as it would have been the case with a convex shield-form.
tunics with rounded neckline, slit front and v-shaped border can be mentioned, as well as the long sleeved women’s dress with wide flared cuffs, the typical female garment of post-conquest England\textsuperscript{5}.

Another correspondence between the Tapestry and the archaeological record can be found within the brooches. The two late Anglo-Saxon disc brooches from Quidenham (Norfolk) and Micheldever (Hampshire) show striking parallels to the objects depicted\textsuperscript{6}. Both the pictured and the surviving brooches are segmented, a detail that can not be found in another contemporary illustration. This could be an indication that the artist of the Bayeux Tapestry had immediate knowledge of a segmented disc brooch, and that he used his observations in his work.

**Architecture**

Because the buildings contemporary with the Bayeux Tapestry were mostly constructed of wood, there are only few surviving structures. This fact significantly increases the value of iconographic and textual sources. Unfortunately the Bayeux Tapestry can not in all cases be used as an appropriate source, for the buildings named in the inscriptions most often do not show any accordance with the surviving structures. It is therefore only possible to make general points about such things as remaining fortress structures that can be compared to archaeological remains. The predominantly stylised depictions of the domestic dwellings are another problem, because they are of no use for detailed interpretations. It is likely that the artist pictured dwellings he thought to be typical English cottages in his day. Furthermore, there are only exterior views on the Tapestry, so we can not make statements about room arrangement or interior without further evidence.

Concerning the church in Bosham and the Mont Saint Michel on the Tapestry there is no accordance with surviving or traceable structures. The artist seems to have depicted churches in an emblematic manner by using patterns. The placement of the Mont Saint Michel on a rise is a hint that the artist knew about the position, but that does not mean that he also depicted the actual building. It is rather likely that he pictured a building that generally can be interpreted as a church, which is the case with Bosham as well. The specific location can be reconstructed with help of the enclosed inscriptions. The buildings on the embroidery probably have a more compositional rather than representational character.

\textsuperscript{5} See also Lewis 2005, pp. 74-87.

\textsuperscript{6} See also Lewis 2005, p. 79.
Sole exception is Westminster Abbey that harmonises with some of the excavated and surviving structures; it is likely that the Tapestry actually depicts the contemporary building here. Most importantly the fact that Westminster Abbey was one of the first Romanesque buildings of England, as can be seen on the embroidery too, indicates that it is a depiction of this very church. There have not been any other buildings in this style the artist could have used as an example.

Westminster Palace, as well as the other depicted residences of higher status, was highly stylised. It seems that it was not the artists aim to picture specific buildings, but to show the acting persons in an appropriate environment. This goes with the slightly constant depiction of the same building, which further complicates the interpretation. Such schematic representations can be found in other manuscripts too, for example in the Junius 11 (950-1000) from Canterbury; therefore it can be assumed that it in fact is a compilation of architectural elements of contemporary art.

Concerning the named defensive structures on the Bayeux Tapestry, there are little parallels with surviving or excavated structures. The artist presumably depicted mottes, which could be seen...
extensively in England at the embroidery’s time of origin. Hence the illustration of such fortifications is in all probability used as a symbol for the defensive structures of the towns named in the inscriptions. Even though the Bayeux Tapestry is not suitable for immediate comparison with the fortifications named, the depicted mottes yet are influenced by real buildings. Compared to archaeological structures, there are many analogies that allow general conclusions on 11th century defensive structures.

**Everyday objects**
The study of everyday objects is one of the most interesting aspects within medieval archaeology, since it throws light on everyday life of the people at that time. Concerning the contemporary tools, the Bayeux Tapestry proves to be a proper source that supports archaeological knowledge, as can be seen from axes and hatches used in shipbuilding. Obviously the artist distinguished between felling axes and tools that were used for the following woodwork. This difference can also be reconstructed in the archaeological record, a fact that adds some credence to the depictions. There is also the fact that shipbuilding scenes are extremely rare in late Anglo-Saxon illuminations; it is therefore likely that the artist had knowledge of this craft.

The pictured agricultural tools (plough and harrow) harmonise well with excavated finds and findings. The illustration of the draught animals with collar and breast harness is particularly interesting, since the two different ways to hitch up an animal reflect an improvement within agriculture. It should be kept in mind that farm work was also a popular subject in art, as can be seen in many works (primarily labours of the months) throughout the whole of the Middle Ages.

The contemporary tableware paints a different picture. The depictions are too stylised to make any specific suggestions about shape or material. It was not the artists aim to show the objects as such, but to represent a shared meal as part of social life. For this reason details have been omitted, that would allow identification of certain features. Especially the simple bowls and cups are not suitable for comparison with surviving types of tableware, since they often can be distinguished merely by characteristic details like the rim shape or ornaments.

**Ships**
Compared to archaeological remnants of ships, the Bayeux Tapestry seems to represent a stylised form of the contemporary clinker-built type with overlapping planks (symbolised by different coloured, horizontal bands). There are elements of several ship-types, such as gaps in the gunwales (amidships), as can be anticipated by trading vessels, or ornamented stems, a characteristic of pompous ceremony ships. Furthermore there are influences of various shipbuilding regions depicted; the symmetrical form of the hull, with curved keel and
The artistic reconstruction of the danish 11th-century trading vessel Skuldelev 1 shows the stowage amidships. The depicted transport of animals, including a horse, is particularly interesting. Drawing by Morten Gøthche. © Vikingskibsmuseet i Roskilde.

A ship on the Bayeux Tapestry. The different-coloured horizontal bands represent the clinker-built type. Clearly recognisable are the gap in the gunwale amidships, the opened oar ports and the figureheads. Flotte normande from Wikimedia. Author= Ludo29. Licensing: PD.

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Conclusion
Thorough study of the Bayeux Tapestry as a source for the 11th century has shown that the embroidery is not in all cases suitable for the interpretation of contemporary objects, first and foremost because the artist did not depict all items in detail and with the same accuracy. Some scenes that show persons of high rank are pictured more carefully to emphasise their importance, and this affects the depicted artefacts as well. It must also be considered that the artist often used elements of contemporary art to show objects of his environment in a simplified manner, especially when this objects are of no further importance for the story line. This can be seen from the buildings, which were only represented in a realistic manner when they were thematically relevant, but in most cases are combinations of architectural elements of art. In this context one should also keep in mind the intention of the Bayeux Tapestry. Even though the Tapestry is used as an iconographic historical source today, and archaeologists are especially interested in the artefacts depicted, the original purpose was to tell a story based on depictions, not the immediate reflection of the real world. As a result there are many objects that merely fulfil a decorative and additional function and did not have to be represented realistically, so the artist used models and stylisations. The influence of contemporary art is clearly recognisable in the depiction of the buildings, but is also visible within weaponry, especially regarding the convex form of the round shields as well as the trousered hauberks.

On the contrary there are indications of the “real world” of the 11th century, especially within the objects where a certain development can be seen or where there are no equivalents in contemporary art. Women’s dresses with the flared cuffs as well as the tunics are examples for clothes with apparent comprehensible fashion innovations. The conical helmets with nasal guards can be considered as depictions of real pieces of equipment, since there are no image sources of the time around 1070. The connection between art schemata and observations of the actual world is reflected in almost all scenes of the Bayeux Tapestry, yet the proportions are not known to us and probably can not be proved properly at all. It is however unlikely that there was a stable equilibrium, but rather that the relations varied depending on context and artistic interest. The major difficulty is the right estimation of objects that can be compared with both parallels in art and appropriate archaeological finds, for example some of the parts of the ships. In these cases it is rarely possible to make a reliable statement about the Bayeux Tapestry’s degree of reality.

The research of finds suitable for comparison with the Tapestry was difficult, especially when it came to everyday objects. The highly stylised illustration on the embroidery is not indicative of details that are essential for the interpretation of the objects, thus for the determination of specific types within the finds. Another problem was the chronology of the surviving objects. There are often only finds that date before or after the 11th century, and therefore show
considerable chronological differences to the time of origin of the Tapestry. In these instances I tried to reconstruct a continuity of the object, and to elaborate common characteristics.

The main aim was to avoid circular arguments that can arise out of comparisons like this. The risk lies in the tendency to seek adjustment between the iconographic source and the archaeological find, since every single detail has to be considered. The experiences I made while writing this thesis brought me to the conclusion that the Bayeux Tapestry holds only a few characteristics that can be used as sound iconographic sourcing for direct comparison with artefacts of the 11th century. The presented finds may prove the existence of some of the objects depicted, but the chronological differences and unresolved questions of details allow no further specification.

Thus, it is not in all instances evident that the illustrated artefacts were actually common in this form in the time of the plot depicted, or in the time of origin of the Tapestry. Everyday objects, as well as swords, are especially difficult in this context since there are few finds from the 11th century in these categories, and one has to draw on objects of earlier or later centuries for comparison.

It remains to be seen if there can be gained further knowledge of the Bayeux Tapestry as a source for archaeological research in the future. Chronologically suitable finds would be most helpful to show the existence of certain objects in the relevant period. But even new finds cannot give information on questions of details, since some objects on the Bayeux Tapestry are just too small and stylised to be identified properly. This fact does not reduce the relevance of the Tapestry as a great reference of this epoch. The depicted scenes of war, as well as the scenes of everyday life give an indispensable insight into many facets of life during this period.

A complete view of the Bayeux Tapestry can be seen on the webpage of Prof. Ulrich Harsch: http://www.hs-augsburg.de/~harsch/Chronologia/Lspost11/Bayeux/bay_tama.html
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