Here is a new book on the Bayeux Tapestry by two medievalists from Emory University, both of whom have come to study it in recent times, one, Elizabeth Carson Pastan an art historian, the other, Stephen White an historian. In it they are proposing a new explanation for the origin of this work of art which is bound to attract the attention of scholars who have studied and written about it in recent years. They do not take issue with the belief accepted by most specialists of the embroidery that it had some connection with the abbey of Augustine in Canterbury, indeed they support this fully. But they resist the idea that Duke William of Normandy's half-brother, Odo, bishop of Bayeux and Earl of Kent, a man with close connections with Augustine, commissioned it. Instead they propose that it was made, not for Odo's cathedral in Bayeux in Normandy, nor for circulation and exhibition in the halls of Norman and English nobility, but for the monks of Augustine. Aside from the Introduction and the Conclusion this is not a single narrative of the two authors collectively but a group of eleven articles, six by White and five by Pastan on different aspects of what are for them several related questions, namely, where was the embroidery made, by whom was it commissioned, for whom was it intended, where was it displayed, and what meaning did it attach to the Norman conquest of England.

Article 1: »The Material Context of the Bayeux Embroidery: Manufacture, Display and Literary References«, p. 9–32, Pastan. In this opening article Pastan looks into the actual production of the textile, the designing then the stitching of wool on linen, probably done by nuns, and estimates that it took at least three years for this to be done. Then a discussion of the first certain reference to the embroidery four centuries later (1476) in an entry in the Inventory of the Bayeux cathedral treasury, followed by the modern discovery of the textile in that cathedral early in the eighteenth century. Finally an evaluation of the possibility that the Loire valley poet Baudri of Bourgueil was describing the embroidery in his poem to Countess Adele of Blois.

Article 2: »Is the Bayeux Embroidery a Record of Events?«, p. 33–58, White. White’s article asks why scholars have been able to draw conflicting conclusions as to the overall meaning of the embroidery’s portrayal of the conquest of England. Thus one school sees it as a presentation of a Norman perspective based upon the belief that Duke William of Normandy was the legitimate successor to King Edward of England but another detects an English point of view, seeing Harold of Wessex as having the right to the throne. In Withe’s view the possibility that the embroidery could be interpreted in these two different ways
stems not only from gaps and ambiguities in the narrative but due to a deliberate decision on the part of the designer «to create or reinforce doubt and uncertainty about how the conquest came about, and whether either William or Harold was Edward’s legitimate successor« («Introduction», p. 4). As a result the embroidery’s account of events is not always historically reliable.

Article 3: »Imagined Patronage«, p. 59–61, Pastan. A major concern of Embroidery scholars has long been to identify the person who commissioned it – a subject on which neither the embroidery itself nor any contemporary sources casts any light. In this article Pastan explains why she rejects the commonly held belief that Odo of Bayeux was the patron, at the same supporting the similarly common belief, based on artistic resemblances between it and illuminations in Augustine manuscripts, that it was produced at that abbey.

Article 4: »The Prosopography of the Bayeux Embroidery and the Community of Augustine’s Canterbury «, p. 82–104, White. In this article White takes a new look at the reasons for picturing of three of the most obscure men to be named in the embroidery – Turold, Wadard and Vital. Earlier scholars have contended that these men had close ties with Bishop Odo and that as the commissioner of the embroidery he brought about their inclusion in it. Rejecting these contentions White emphasizes the close connections of two of these men, Wadard and Vital, with the abbey of Augustine – they were members of its confraternity and commemorated in its Martyrology – and interprets their presence in the embroidery as a sign of the influence of the monks of that abbey in its being designed.

Article 5: »Locating Harold’s Oath and Tracing His Itinerary«, p. 105–121, White. Here White calls into question the belief of many that Harold swore his famous oath to Duke William at Bayeux, on relics in the cathedral, though the accompanying inscription does not say this, thereby pointing to the preferred status of Bishop Odo and strengthening the likelihood that he was the commissioner of the embroidery. Rejecting this possibility White maintains that the unusual attention given to the Breton campaign and the abbey of Mont-Saint-Michel in the embroidery was related to the rule of Scolland as abbot of Augustine in Canterbury. A former monk at Mont-Saint-Michel Scolland came to Augustine’s after the conquest and became abbot there from 1072–1087. The widely held belief that the embroidery was produced at Augustine’s during those years, a belief central to the work of Pastan and White, leads them to propose that Scolland was the commissioner of that textile, and that the prominence of Mont-Saint-Michel and the Breton campaign in the narrative reflect his influence on the designer.

Article 6: »Bishop Odo at the Banquet«, p. 126–153, Pastan. Here Pastan proposes a different interpretation of the embroidery’s Norman banquet scene (scene 48, D. Wilson) in England prior to Battle. Traditionally this has been seen to emphasize the importance of Bishop Odo of Bayeux as the commissioner as well as in part the designer of the textile. While not denying the prominence of Odo in this scene, Pastan argues that it can best be understood as reflecting the collective view of the monastic community of Augustine’s as to the meaning of the Norman conque
Article 7: »The Fables in the Borders«, p. 154–182, White. In this article White examines the role of the many fables pictured in the borders of the embroidery and takes issue with the belief of earlier scholars that these are to be interpreted from either a pro-Norman or a pro-English perspective. Instead he sees them: »the fable-images provided […] additional layers of meaning to the narrative by providing ironic, satirical, and sometimes bitingly humorous commentary on all participants in the action in the main frieze and, more generally, on the political world of kings, lords, milites, and clerici in which the main narrative was set« (p. 160). And this was done for the monks of Augustine: »the people best equipped to realize the fables' potential for satire […] those who viewed the embroidery with the highly cultivated sense of their separation from the secular world, superiority to it, and power to judge it that was essential to the role that monks played as mediators between humans and God« (p. 174–175).

Article 8: »Representing Architecture«, p. 183–209, Pastan. This is a study of the buildings pictured in the embroidery, thirty three in all, castles, churches, etc.; why the designer chose to include them, i. e. their function in the story, their accuracy in portraying actual buildings, and the inscriptions accompanying three of them. She concludes that the designer used them in order to enhance the development of the narrative, and that their total absence from the scenes of the final battle was to stress the horror of the slaughter taking place. And noting that the three buildings to be named in inscriptions, Bosham, the church of Peter the Apostle (Westminster Abbey), and the abbey of Mont-Saint-Michel all had close ties with Augustine's in Canterbury, she sees this as further proof of the influence of Scolland, former monk of Mont-Saint-Michel, in the designing of the embroidery.

Article 9: »Legal Ceremonies and the Question of Legitimacy«, p. 210–236, White. Historians have long contended that in the opening scene in the embroidery King Edward is confirming to Harold his earlier nomination of Duke William of Normandy as his successor as king of England. This legitimized the latter's invasion when Harold later intervened, committed perjury, and made himself the successor. In contrast to this »traditionalist« view, others, »revisionists«, have maintained that in scene 30 on his deathbed, Edward named Harold as his successor, leading to an English perspective of the conquest. In this article White contests both of these interpretations and argues that the embroidery: »was designed to convey doubt and uncertainty to its educated viewers at Augustine's about how the conquest had come about« (p. 231). »Moreover it implied that it was by God's judgment that Harold and the English fell and that the duke owed the throne of England to God who chose William as his instrument to punish the English for their sins and Harold for his act of perjury« (p. 231).

Article 10: »The Fall of the English«, p. 237–259, White. In his analysis of the battle scenes in the embroidery White argues that its portrayal of the Norman defeat differs radically from those of contemporary historians such as William of Poitiers in showing this as an overwhelming slaughter of the English. Further, that people of the day, particularly the monks at Augustine's Canterbury, could have interpreted the English defeat as God's punishment of them for their sins.
Article 11: »Quid faciat ... Scollandus? The Abbey Church of Augustine’s c. 1073–1100«, p. 261–287, Pastan. In this last article Pastan presents evidence consistent with the possibility that the embroidery was designed to be hung and displayed at the new abbey church at Augustine’s Canterbury constructed starting in the 1070’s under Abbot Scolland. Since the church no longer survives she turns to documentary evidence and archaeological findings to envisage its size, structure, and dimensions, and concludes that the embroidery could have been hung, not in the nave, but in the monk’s choir where the monastic congregation could have seen it.

To document their arguments and aid the reader the authors have added visual material at the end: a complete reproduction in black and white photos of the embroidery, complemented by over 30 photos of manuscripts and drawings relevant to their discussions, complemented with 35 color photos of select scenes from the embroidery as well as of other manuscripts and illuminations.

The hypotheses of Pastan and White inevitably raise certain questions. What could have prompted a community of monks to commission a monumental work of art to commemorate the conquest of England, their country, by a foreign power? Were there precedents for this in the recent past? Had earlier monks at Augustine’s commissioned embroideries which were then exhibited in the abbey church? Or were there other instances where the monks of a neighboring abbey brought about the production of a comparable embroidery which they could have known? If not where did the idea come from? I find it difficult to imagine that they could have conceived such a novel move entirely on their own out of the blue, and then have carried it out. Embroideries are known to have been made and displayed in other places in England and on the continent in earlier medieval times – almost nothing from any of these survives today – but Augustine's does not appear to have been associated with the production of anything of this kind. And the great tapestries of the later Middle Ages were commissioned by kings and nobles to commemorate military victories, not by monks.

Also raising a question is their hypothesis that the Bayeux Embroidery is a religious textile intended to be displayed and viewed by the monks in Augustine’s, not a secular one to be shown principally to nobility in baronial halls in England and Normandy as many have maintained. Religious in the sense that: »... it implied that it was by God’s judgment that Harold and the English fell, and that the duke owed the throne of England to God who chose William as his instrument to punish the English for their sins and Harold for his act of perjury« (p. 231). Then there is White’s contention (p. 231) that the embroidery »was designed to convey doubt and uncertainty to its educated viewers at Augustine’s about how the conquest had come about«, thereby promoting neither a pro-Norman nor a pro-English view. Moreover he maintains that the monks of Augustine would have had »the literary and visual sophistication to read textual and visual narratives on multiple levels, to understand both kinds of narratives in the light of biblical history, to be particularly attentive to the question of God’s role in history and to engage in the kinds of analogical reasoning that was essential to monastic religious culture«, p. 53. In effect, then, as Pastan and White see it, the embroidery presents a biblical interpretation of the conquest which the sophisticated, learned monks
of Augustine’s would have perceived, but does this not imply that others might have missed this message? To conclude that the designer created this textile of such monumental proportions only for the handful of monks at the abbey and was not thinking of a wider range of viewers – royalty, nobility, townspeople, et al. – seems questionable to me.

Can anyone deny that in its overall scenes and images this textile pictures noblemen travelling, preparing for war, and engaging in combat? Religious scenes and figures such as monks and clerics are very rare in the story. And one cannot overlook the fact that Pastan and White are the first embroidery scholars to detect this religious message: none of the scores of specialists from previous generations caught sight of it.

The authors recognize that there is no documentary proof that the monks of Augustine Canterbury commissioned this embroidery as they hypothesize, nor is there any that it was produced there – Pastan suggests that nuns of Barking Abbey nearby may have done the work (p. 13, n. 20). However that may have been, how did it come into the possession of Bayeux Cathedral in Normandy by at least 1476?

Neither one addresses this question. If my hypothesis of 2005 is correct, King Charles VI of France owned it in 1396, and from him it passed first to John of Bedford, the English regent in France in the late 1420’s, then to Duke Phillip the Good of Burgundy who donated it to the Cathedral of Bayeux in 1431. If this is what happened then how and when did it leave Augustine’s Canterbury and fall into the hands of Charles VI sometime before 1396? Or if my hypothesis is not correct, how did the cathedral of Bayeux acquire it by 1476?

Were it not for the complete lack of explicit contemporary evidence as to the origins of the Bayeux Embroidery – who commissioned it, why, when and where was it made, and for whom? – there would never have been the great amount of scholarly research such as has been dedicated to this textile in the past century and a half. It is precisely the mysteries and unknowns surrounding it which have excited and attracted scholars, and Pastan and White are simply the latest in a long list to have delved into the question. Yet the same lack of evidence has meant that the explanations and solutions of earlier authors have been proposals and hypotheses, not matters of fact, and I believe that this is also true of the writings of these two authors. This is not in the least to belittle their work. I find their suggestions interesting and thought-provoking and look forward to the reactions of others who read their work.

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