

Women and the Bayeux Tapestry



Famous image of Harold's death from the Bayeux Tapestry
(source: [Musée de la Tapisserie de Bayeux](https://www.bayeuxmuseum.com/en/the-bayeux-tapestry/discover-the-bayeux-tapestry/explore-online/)¹)

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<https://www.bayeuxmuseum.com/en/the-bayeux-tapestry/discover-the-bayeux-tapestry/explore-online/>.

Object Info

Name: The Bayeux Tapestry

Location: Probably made in England, possibly for display in the nave of Bayeux Cathedral.

Dating: Before 1100, probably in the first two decades after 1066.

Material: Linen and wool.

Size: c. 70m long x 50 cm height.

Makers: Unknown, likely to be English women, possibly connected to Barking Abbey.

Patron: Unknown, prime candidates are Odo of Bayeux or William I. Edith of Wessex has also been suggested.

¹ Details of the Official Digital representation of the Bayeux Tapestry – 11th century; City of Bayeux, DRAC Normandie, University of Caen Normandie, CNRS, Ensicaen, Photos: 2017 – La Fabrique de patrimoines en Normandie.

Current location: The object is normally displayed in the purpose-built [Musée de la Tapisserie de Bayeux](#) in France, but it will be present in the British Museum for an exhibition in 2026-27. A replica made in the nineteenth century is also on display in Reading Museum.

Brief Description

The Bayeux Tapestry is one of the most famous pieces of material culture produced in medieval England. Along with Domesday Book, it is a fundamentally important source for our understanding of the Norman Conquest, not only in terms of what happened but also how it was understood by contemporaries, and how they wanted it to be remembered.

The object tells the story of the Norman Conquest of England from c. 1064, with King Edward sending Harold Godwinson, then earl of Wessex, on a visit to Normandy. The tapestry then takes the viewer through a sequence of key events, including the meeting of William and Harold, their campaigning together, as well as Harold giving an oath to William. Edward the Confessor's death is portrayed, then Harold's assumption of the crown, and nine months later William's invasion and the battle of Hastings take up the final third, but there is a final section missing from the piece. The tapestry currently ends with the death of King Harold and the flight of the English, but it may have ended with a depiction of William's coronation.

The scenes on the tapestry follow a chronological order and are divided into the main middle section which tells the story, with a band above and a band below which have additional images and decoration. Short snippets of text in Latin describe to the viewer what is happening in some of the scenes. Three women are depicted in the main story of the Bayeux Tapestry: a mystery women named as *Ælgyva*, a woman mourning at the death of Edward the Confessor (very likely Queen Edith), and an unidentified woman fleeing from a burning building with her child. Additional images of women (and female mythical beasts) can be found in the borders of the tapestry, contributing further layers of meaning to the story.

Women and the making of the Bayeux tapestry

The Bayeux Tapestry is not, in fact, a tapestry; it is a piece of embroidery. It was made from 9 panels of linen (a material made from a plant called flax) that were woven on a loom. The scenes were carefully embroidered from wool dyed with natural dyes using ten colours, different shades of red, blue, green, beige and yellow. Initial scientific exploration suggests some of reds probably came from madder root, the yellow from weld, and the blues from woad.²

We have no information about who made the tapestry, but at the time embroidery was a social and cultural practice associated with women, and there are a few reasons why most historians believe they were English. The sewing skills of English

² Carola Hicks, *The Bayeux tapestry: the life story of a masterpiece* (Chatto & Windus, 2006), 43. Available to borrow on Archive.org: https://archive.org/details/bayeuxtapestryli0000hick_g0a7/page/n7/mode/2up.

women were renowned in this period, and a particular style known as *Opus Anglicanum* (English work) was famous across Europe. William of Poitiers, who wrote the *Deeds of William, Duke of the Normans and King of the English* (c. 1074) wrote that '[t]he women of the English people are very skilled in needlework and weaving gold thread'.³ The Domesday Book also includes examples of embroiderers who held fairly substantial land or received regular remuneration. The entry for Knook in Wiltshire reads:

Leofgyth holds Knook. Her husband held it TRE [in the time of King Edward] and it paid geld [tax] for 3 1/2 hides. There is land for 2 1/2 ploughs, which are there, with one slave, and four villains and four borders. There is a mill rendering 15s [shillings], and five acres of meadow, and pasture half a league long and one of them broad. It is worth £3. This Leofgyth made and makes the gold fringe of the king and the queen.⁴

The Bayeux Tapestry is not the high-quality gold work that English women were famed for, but the way that the Latin words are spelled suggest English influence, for example it uses the joined *Æ* diphthong and the letter *ð*. There is also evidence to suggest that the team involved in creating the tapestry were trained professionals all using a similar stitching style, though it may be the case that one professional embroiderer 'managed' the project while training others as they worked on the different sections. To ensure that the joins did not show, when near complete most of the pieces were joined together with the embroidery continuing over the top. There seems to be a mistake in the join between the first and second pieces which was rectified in later parts of the work.⁵

Patrons, designers and makers

Various people have been put forward as the possible patron of the tapestry from William the Conqueror to Odo, bishop of Bayeux (half-brother of William), Count Eustace of Boulogne, Queen Matilda (wife of William), and Queen Edith (wife of Edward the Confessor and sister of Harold Godwinson).

The person who paid for the tapestry clearly had an influence on how it turned out, yet so did the person or persons in charge of the design. The designer may not have been an embroiderer, and it is possible that the makers worked from sketches on parchment, though none such survive. Some have argued that the designer was Scolland of Canterbury, abbot of St Augustine's Abbey.⁶ Others think that the tapestry was created on the initiative of St Augustine's Abbey rather than under the patronage of Odo of Bayeux.⁷ The close connection between this institution and Barking Abbey in

³ Quoted from R.H.C. Davis and Marjorie Chibnall (eds), *The Gesta Guillelmi of William of Poitiers* (Clarendon Press, 1998), 176–77.

⁴ See 'Leofgyth', OpenDomesday, <https://opendomesday.org/name/leofgyth/> (accessed 15 June 2026).

⁵ Carola Hicks, *The Bayeux Tapestry*, 47–49.

⁶ Howard B. Clarke, 'The Identity of the Designer of the Bayeux Tapestry', in *Anglo-Norman Studies 35: Proceedings of the Battle Conference 2012*, ed. David Bates (Boydell & Brewer, 2013), 119–40.

⁷ Elizabeth Carson Pastan, 'Imagined Patronage', in *The Bayeux Tapestry and Its Contexts: A Reassessment*, ed. Elizabeth Carson Pastan, Stephen D. White, and Kate Gilbert (Boydell & Brewer, 2014), 81.

Essex has led some to suggest that the nuns of Barking might have been responsible for making the tapestry.⁸ William the Conqueror stayed there following the Battle of Hastings and received the submissions of some powerful lords and nobles there, including Edith of Wessex. Hicks has argued that it was Edith who was patron of the tapestry, creating a connection with Wilton Abbey, though this theory has not been widely accepted.⁹ Scholarship on the material culture of the tapestry, especially on the uniformity of its stitching and composition, have suggested that this was a professional workshop, or at least headed by a professional embroiderer overseeing training and working together as a team. Women working at smaller convents or in isolation are therefore less likely. Larger abbeys were rich and patronised by royal funds, so may have had the resources, space and skilled workforce to achieve such a big project.

Object biography

- 1476 The Bayeux tapestry first appears in historical record in the inventory of the treasures of Bayeux Cathedral, which states that it was hung up in the nave of the Cathedral once a year.
- 1690s French scholar Nicholas Joseph Foucault came across the tapestry and commissions some drawings of it but these were not completed.
- 1728 Father Bernard of Montfaucon tracks down the source of the drawings to the tapestry at Bayeux. Queen Matilda (Matilda of Flanders) is rumoured to be the patron.
- 1803 The Bayeux Tapestry – an icon of Norman triumph over the English – is exhibited in Paris at the express wish of Napoleon.
During the nineteenth century some patching with linen and ‘restoration’ of the stitching takes place which may have altered some of the tapestry’s original features, like the arrow in Harold’s eye.
- 1885-86 A replica of the Bayeux tapestry was sewn by a group of ladies from Leek, managed by Mrs. Elizabeth Wardle, who was in the circle of designer William Morris.
- 1941-45 The Bayeux tapestry is moved several times and comes under the control of Nazi occupying forces. After the allies liberated Paris in August 1944, it was displayed in the Louvre in early 1945 as a sign of triumph and then returned to Bayeux.
- 1983 Display of the Bayeux tapestry in a new exhibition space, the Bayeux Museum.
- October 2026 The Bayeux Tapestry exhibition opens at the British Museum.

⁸ Elizabeth Carson Pastan, 'The Material Context of the Bayeux Embroidery:

Manufacture, Display, and Literary References', in *The Bayeux Tapestry and Its Contexts*, 13n20.

⁹ Carola Hicks, 'The Patronage of Queen Edith', in *The Bayeux Tapestry: New Approaches*, ed. Michael J. Lewis, Gale R. Owen-Crocker, and Dan Terkla (Oxbow Books, 2011), 5–9.

Women in the Bayeux Tapestry

1) Edith of Wessex (c. 1023–75)¹⁰

Key facts

- Born: Uncertain. After 1019–23, likely before 1027.
- Parents: Godwin, earl of Wessex (d. 1053), and Gytha (d. after 1068)
- Siblings: Six brothers (Swein, Harold (Godwineson), Tostig, Gyrth, Leofwine and Wulfnoth) and two sisters (Ælfgifu and Gunhild).
- Husband: Edward, king of England (d. 1066). Later canonised and known as Edward ‘the Confessor’.
- Died: 18 December 1075

Edith, daughter of Earl Godwin and Gytha of Wessex was raised and educated at Wilton Abbey. She married King Edward the Confessor in 1045, and the match was a sign of Earl Godwin’s growing power and influence. Godwin’s position, however, affected Edith’s – in 1051 she was abruptly repudiated and expelled from the royal court when Edward fell out with Godwin, but she was reinstated and her possessions were restored after they reconciled in 1052.

When Edward died in 1066 it was her brother Harold who became king, but he was already in a feud with another brother, Tostig. Tostig died fighting Harold at the battle of Stamford Bridge before Harold was killed at Hastings fighting the Normans. During the conquest, Edith lost four brothers overall. At some point during the Conquest (1065–67), Edith commissioned an important history known as the *Life of King Edward* (*Vita Ædwardi regis*). It was intended to sanctify the reputation of her husband as well as that of Edith’s family. William the Conqueror was lenient to Edith despite the rebellion of her mother, Gytha. In Easter 1071 Edith attended the consecration of Walcher, bishop of Durham, and on 18 December 1075 she died at Winchester and was buried alongside Edward in Westminster Abbey.

Although she is not named, it is likely that the weeping woman wiping away her tears with a veil at Edward the Confessor’s death bed was meant to be Edith of Wessex, his wife and queen. Carola Hicks argues that this is a crucial moment in the tapestry – she is a witness to Edward’s command to Harold to take up the throne, even though he had previously given an oath to William. If so, it is quite a sensitive attempt to explain the dilemma that Harold faced, and it chimes with other surprisingly sympathetic portrayals of Harold in the tapestry, for example, when he is shown as acting with bravery in the campaigns where he fights alongside William. For these reasons Carol Hicks goes on to suggest that Edith had a role as patron and commissioner of the tapestry, linking its making to Wilton Abbey where Edith grew up.¹¹ Other historians still favour Odo of Bayeux as the main candidate for commissioning the tapestry.

¹⁰ For full biographical details, see additional TMW resource.

¹¹ See Hicks, *Bayeux Tapestry*, ch. 2, and Hicks, ‘The Patronage of Queen Edith’.



Depiction of a weeping woman at Edward the Confessor's deathbed, presumed to be Edith
(source: [Musée de la Tapisserie de Bayeux](#)¹²)

2) Ælfgyva: the mystery woman of the Bayeux tapestry



Depiction of the mysterious 'Ælfgyva'
(source: [Musée de la Tapisserie de Bayeux](#)¹³)

¹² Details of the Official Digital representation of the Bayeux Tapestry – 11th century; City of Bayeux, DRAC Normandie, University of Caen Normandie, CNRS, Ensicaen, Photos: 2017 – La Fabrique de patrimoines en Normandie

¹³ Details of the Official Digital representation of the Bayeux Tapestry – 11th century; City of Bayeux, DRAC Normandie, University of Caen Normandie, CNRS, Ensicaen, Photos: 2017 – La Fabrique de patrimoines en Normandie

The image above shows a woman presented inside a doorway, with a man to the right of her reaching into the space. The text above reads 'Where a certain cleric and Aelfgyva'. We can tell he is a cleric because of the shaved tonsure on his head. The borders above and below, which sometimes give a further indication of meaning, show a cross above, and a naked man below, which may indicate lust or a sexual misdemeanour. Although she is the only women named in the tapestry, historians have struggled to identify Aelfgyva because of the ambiguity of the text (which seems unfinished or to imply something which was common knowledge at the time) and the picture. There is also the issue that Aelfgyva or Aelgyva (also a Latin spelling of English Aelfgifu) was a very popular name and had a number of alternative spellings. There are at least a dozen possible candidates for Aelfgyva's identity, but none can be proved entirely convincingly to date.¹⁴ However, this provides an interesting opportunity to explore the lives of several women who experienced and were involved in the Conquest. Some of the more popular options are:

Ælfgyva (Aelfeva in Domesday), a sister of Harold Godwineson, whom he had supposedly pledged to marry to William. The partial covering on her face has been interpreted variously as a bridal veil or a wimple. However, Ann Williams argues that Harold did not actually have a sister called Ælfgyva, but it is a misunderstanding of an entry in Domesday Book where someone identified Aelfeva as the sister of Earl Harold, when in fact she was a sister of another Harold who was a thane.¹⁵ This land ended up in the hands of Odo of Bayeux.

Aelfgyva, abbess of Barking Abbey. If we concur that Bayeux's Aelfgyva is wearing a wimple, she is also depicted within an enclosed space of columns indicating a cloister, making it likely that she was a religious woman. If the nuns of the convent of Barking were indeed involved in the tapestry's making, they may have wanted to represent their abbess in the main story.

However, this does not resolve the issue of a clearly implied sexual scandal. The cleric is reaching into the convent and touching Aelfgyva's face – it is possible that he may have been offering a blessing, but there is a naked figure in the border below. It might be suggesting that Ælfgyva had an affair with the cleric, or that she was being forgiven for some kind of sexual sin, or that she conquered lust by entering the cloister.

We must also consider the timing of the events – the tapestry runs in a chronological order, so whatever the makers were referring to it is likely a story connected to the time when Harold was visiting William in Normandy.

¹⁴ Miles Warren Campbell, 'Aelfgyva: The Mysterious Lady of the Bayeux Tapestry', *Annales de Normandie*, 34e année, 2 (1984): 127–45.

¹⁵ Buckinghamshire entry for Waldrige, Ixhill manor, Phillimore reference Buckinghamshire 4,21. Ann Williams, 'On the Spindle side: the kinswomen of Earl Godwine of Essex', *Approaches to History: Essays in Honour of Hirokazu Tsurushima*, ed. Naoki Haruta, Yukio Arai, and David Roffe (Tokyo, 2022), 1–12.

Ælfgyva/Eadgifu, abbess of Leominster. This abbess was the victim of a well-known scandal. She was abducted from her convent by Swein Godwineson, Harold's brother in 1046 for up to a year before he was exiled for carrying out this crime. It is possible that she bore Swein a child named Hakon, who may have been one of the hostages that Harold had gone to collect from Normandy prior to the conquest.¹⁶

Ælfgyva/Ælfgifu of Northampton, first wife of King Cnut (d. 1035) the Danish conqueror of England, and mother of his sons Swein (who went on to rule Norway) and Harold Harefoot (who went on to rule England after Cnut). The picture may be a reference to a rumour recorded by John of Worcester that Ælfgifu was unable to give Cnut a son so presented him with the son of certain priest whom they named Swein, and later pulled the same trick with the son of a cobbler for Harold Harefoot.¹⁷ The story might therefore be designed to cast doubt on any Danish claims to the English throne, which were still being pursued into the reign of William I.

Emma of Normandy, Edward the Confessor's mother, who confusingly changed her name to Ælfgyva during her first marriage to Edward's father, Aethelred the Unready.¹⁸ Emma went on to marry Cnut after he conquered England. Rumours about an affair with a bishop circulated long after her death, which might cause doubt over Edward the Confessor's claim, but it seems unclear otherwise why she would appear in the tapestry in this guise, especially as it was partially through her that William had a connection to the English throne, and she died in 1052, long before the events in this scene took place.

¹⁶ Miles Warren Campbell, 'Aelfgyva: The Mysterious Lady of the Bayeux Tapestry', *Annales de Normandie*, 34.2 (1984): 127–45.

¹⁷ J. Bard McNulty, 'The Lady Aelfgyva in the Bayeux Tapestry', *Speculum* 55, no. 4 (1980): 659–68; John of Worcester, *The Chronicle of John of Worcester*, vol. 2, ed. R. R. Darlington and P. McGurk, trans. Jennifer Bray and P. McGurk, Oxford Medieval Texts (Clarendon Press, 1995).

¹⁸ Joanna Laynesmith, 'A Canterbury Tale', *History Today* 62, 10 (2012): <https://www.historytoday.com/archive/bayeux-tapestry-canterbury-tale>.

3) A woman running from a burning building with a child



Depiction of woman and child fleeing the burning building in the Bayeux Tapestry
(source: [Musée de la Tapisserie de Bayeux](https://www.musee-bayeux.com/)¹⁹)

The final instance of a woman on the main body of the tapestry is a woman fleeing from a building clasping the hand of a child to her right while two soldiers hold torches to the building in order to set it alight. This type of raiding – setting fire to settlements and forcing people to flee or be killed or captured – was quite standard in medieval warfare. Without more information or text, it is almost impossible to tie this image to a particular person or event and, in the same way that women are often described as nameless victims of war in the chronicles of the period, so the tapestry makers here might be indicating a grander scale of suffering for the English people that took place in the raids running up to the battle of Hastings.

Although we cannot identify her, historians have drawn connections between this image on the Bayeux tapestry and sculpture in Rome (particularly the column of Marcus Aurelius which also tells a story of conquest in a ‘cartoon’ manner) to suggest that the designer may have been influenced by a pilgrimage there.²⁰ This is one of the arguments which lends strength to identifying Abbot Scolland as the possible designer of the piece, as he went to Rome in 1071–72.

¹⁹ Details of the Official Digital representation of the Bayeux Tapestry – 11th century; City of Bayeux, DRAC Normandie, University of Caen Normandie, CNRS, Ensicaen, Photos: 2017 – La Fabrique de patrimoines en Normandie

²⁰ R. Howard Bloch, *A Needle in the Right Hand of God: The Norman Conquest of 1066 and the Making and Meaning of the Bayeux Tapestry* (Random House, 2006), 147–48.

4) Female figures in the borders and animals

Female figures also appear in the borders of the tapestry. Although most of the borders above and below feature designs of pairs of animals, these, and other images are used to highlight extra interpretation of events in the story. For example, when Harold gives his oath to William, winged lions in the border above are seen to be biting their own wings. As well as the naked figure in the scene featuring Aelfgyva, there are female nudes depicted in the tapestry. One is portrayed cowering away from a naked man next to a hunting scene which implies sexual violence in the early part of the tapestry, and two more naked figures in the borders (one clearly a woman, another whose sex is not clear) appear above near the arrival of the troops at Hastings, being threatened with weapons or violence. There are mythical creatures in the borders which are feminine such as sphinxes. Further, historians have also discussed how the gender of the horses portrayed in the Bayeux Tapestry (whether the men are riding stallions, geldings or mares) may also have implications for the masculinity of the characters portrayed within it.



One of the sphynxes depicted in the borders
(source: [Musée de la Tapisserie de Bayeux](#)²¹)

²¹ Details of the Official Digital representation of the Bayeux Tapestry – 11th century; City of Bayeux, DRAC Normandie, University of Caen Normandie, CNRS, Ensicaen, Photos: 2017 – La Fabrique de patrimoines en Normandie



Some of the women depicted in the borders of the Bayeux Tapestry
(source: [Musée de la Tapisserie de Bayeux](https://www.musee-bayeux.com/)²²)

5) The Mora – Matilda of Flanders’ gift to William²³



William's ship, the Mora, as depicted on the Bayeux Tapestry
(source: [Musée de la Tapisserie de Bayeux](https://www.musee-bayeux.com/)²⁴)

²² Details of the Official Digital representation of the Bayeux Tapestry – 11th century; City of Bayeux, DRAC Normandie, University of Caen Normandie, CNRS, Ensicaen, Photos: 2017 – La Fabrique de patrimoines en Normandie

²³ See accompanying TMW resource on Matilda of Flanders

²⁴ Details of the Official Digital representation of the Bayeux Tapestry – 11th century; City of Bayeux, DRAC Normandie, University of Caen Normandie, CNRS, Ensicaen, Photos: 2017 – La Fabrique de patrimoines en Normandie

The *Mora*, William's ship in which he sailed to England, was paid for and kitted out by his wife Matilda of Flanders.

Matilda of Flanders was the queen consort of William the Conqueror. Matilda was instrumental to the success of the Norman Conquest. She managed Normandy in William's absence while on expedition in England in 1066 and she gifted him the ship, the *Mora*, which took him to England in the first place. Although Matilda herself was not represented on the tapestry, her ship was. After the Conquest, a list of ships was compiled with the construction of William's ship described:

In honour of the duke, Mathilda, later queen, had a ship built called the *Mora* with which the duke crossed the sea. On the prow she had fitted a golden child who pointed with his right hand to England and who with his left hand pressed an ivory horn against his lips. For this reason the duke gave the county of Kent to Mathilda.²⁵

The writer of the ship list was not entirely correct in this instance; William granted the county of Kent to his brother, Odo of Bayeux.²⁶

For many years, people thought Matilda was the patron of the Bayeux tapestry, presuming that she had made it for her husband – to the extent that it was referred to for a long time as 'Queen Matilda's tapestry'.

Interpretations

There has been much speculation over the years regarding who commissioned and made the Bayeux Tapestry. In the eighteenth and early nineteenth century, there was a popular legend that the tapestry was made by Matilda of Flanders with her ladies-in-waiting although this has long since been discredited. **H. F. Delauney** was one of the first critics of this theory although his argument was based largely on the tapestry's more risqué border illustrations, supposing such content would have been unseemly for a queen to embroider. He instead proposed that Odo of Bayeux was the more likely patron of the tapestry.

In 1824 Delauney took the unprecedented step of discounting any Mathilde/Matilda as responsible for the making of the Bayeux Tapestry because of the 'indecencies' in the borders. These 'indecencies' – nude figures in crude poses implying sexual activity and the obvious maleness of the horses – had been commented on before, but were seen as reflecting shamefully on Mathilde and the mores of the Norman court rather than indicating a different patron. Delauney was convinced that Odo himself was the most likely patron on the basis of his numerous representations in the embroidery and from biographical information which suggested the bishop was an ambitious and ruthless man

²⁵ Quoted from Elisabeth van Houts, 'The Echo of the Conquest in the Latin Sources: Duchess Mathilda, her Daughters and the Enigma of the Golden Child', in *The Bayeux Tapestry: Embroidering the Facts of History*, ed. Pierre Bouet, Brian Levy, and François Neveux (Presses Universitaires de Caen, 2004), 149.

²⁶ Elisabeth van Houts, 'The Ship List of William the Conqueror', *Anglo-Norman Studies* 10 (1987): 173.

with few morals. As a powerful ecclesiastic and feudal lord in both Normandy and England, he was in a position to commission a work as expensive and time-consuming as the Bayeux Tapestry must have been. Delauney went further than earlier suggestions that the Tapestry was meant as a decoration for Bayeux Cathedral by suggesting that it was made specifically for the building's dedication in 1077. ... Further research on the biography and character of Odo of Bayeux has tended to strengthen the plausibility of the attribution of the work to his patronage...²⁷

Alexandra Gajewski and **Stefanie Seeberg** point out some of the challenges in working out the extent to which noble women were involved in needlework, especially when they were acting as patrons and donating textiles, or giving them as gifts.

Despite the evidence for women embroidering, the real conditions of production at court or in the convent remain generally unknown to us. In part, this is due to the broad sense given to the word *facere* in the Middle Ages. Thus, where a text or an inscription says that a noblewoman 'made' an embroidery, it can mean that she commissioned it, furnished the expensive materials, supervised its making, and/or embroidered it with her own hands. More important than distinguishing between the patron and the hand at work was the fact that the decoration of textiles with ornaments, images and inscriptions added value to an already luxurious object. Such ornamentation could communicate meaning or represent the female donor, whether she had stitched the piece herself or with the help of her attendants.

It is striking, however, that for some chroniclers of this period it clearly mattered to specify that a female donor had created a textile herself. Medieval *vitae* of saintly queens, chronicles, ecclesiastical inventories and courtly literature from various regions of medieval Europe recorded cases of lay or religious women who had woven, sewn, or embroidered textiles 'with their own hands'. The late twelfth-century *Liber Eliensis*, for example, attributed a stole and a maniple [both a type of priest's vestments] of matching materials to the handicraft of Ely's patron saint, Æthelthryth. Ecclesiastical chroniclers also laid emphasis on donations of textiles when they could claim that noblewomen had themselves produced or ornamented these cloths. Even in these cases, however, where medieval writers insist on attributing the work to the women themselves, it is impossible to know the extent to which these noblewomen were really responsible for the embroideries that these texts assign to them, or whether they acted in a supervisory capacity. Yet it is precisely because embroidered textiles were associated with female saints as their makers that they were preserved over the centuries in different parts of medieval Europe...²⁸

²⁷ Shirley Ann Brown, *The Bayeux Tapestry: History and Bibliography* (Boydell Press, 1988), 32.

²⁸ Alexandra Gajewski and Stefanie Seeberg, 'Having her hand in it? Elite women as "makers" of textile art in the Middle Ages', *Journal of Medieval History* 42, 1 (2016): 36.

Carola Hicks made the case that it was Edith of Wessex who was the patron of the Bayeux Tapestry, rather than other purported patrons like Odo of Bayeux. Hicks made the argument based on four main points:²⁹

- That the tapestry was commissioned by someone wanting to show both sides of the conflict.
- That the tapestry focuses on contemporary figures so was likely commissioned shortly after 1066.
- That embroidery – rather than other contemporary art forms like illumination or wall paintings – was the chosen art form suggests the involvement of a woman patron.
- Edith also had access to craftspeople at Wilton Abbey where she retired and in her dower city of Winchester. There were also other nunneries such as Romsey, Wherwell, Amesbury and Barking Abbey, where the nuns were particularly renowned for their sewing.

Though Hicks made a compelling argument for Edith's patronage – and indeed for a woman patron of the tapestry – she did also note the difficulty of definitely identifying Edith as the patron responsible for the tapestry:

Women of Edith's rank – such as her sister-in-law Countess Judith, mother-in-law Queen Emma and Godiva, wife of the Earl of Mercia – were accustomed to commission important works, which included finely illustrated bibles and gospel books embellished with ornate gold and silver covers, lavishly decorated containers for saints' relics, gem-studded crucifixes and rich ecclesiastical textiles. Such high-ranking women could ultimately outdo their husbands in generous patronage by personally embroidering some of the hangings they donated. These might well include sewn narratives of recent history. Ælfflaed, widow of the East Anglian earl Byrhtnoth who was killed by the Danes in 991, presented to the monastery at Ely a hanging depicting her husband's heroic campaigns, which she may have worked herself.

Edith's patronage of the Tapestry cannot, of course, be proved any more than that of Odo, Eustace and the others. But her particular skills and experience, and the shifting loyalties in her own life, can all be paralleled in the making and the ultimate ambiguities of the hanging. Women sewed, women commissioned works of art and literature, women were capable of arguing their own case. What can be reconstructed of Edith's character and career makes her a plausible candidate too.³⁰

Historical consensus maintains that the most likely patron of the Bayeux Tapestry was Odo, William's half-brother and bishop of Bayeux as summed up by David Musgrove and Michael Lewis:

²⁹ As outlined in Hicks, *Bayeux Tapestry*, ch. 2, and Hicks, 'The Patronage of Queen Edith'.

³⁰ Hicks, *Bayeux Tapestry*, 39.

The leading candidate as patron is Odo, Bishop of Bayeux, the half-brother of William the Conqueror. Odo was a loyal ally of Duke William in the run-up to the Conquest and was present at the Battle of Hastings. Very shortly after 1066 he was made Earl of Kent, which accorded him great wealth and power ... One other, and more likely, contention is that Odo would have wanted the Tapestry made in time for the consecration of the new cathedral he was having built in Bayeux. That ceremony took place on 14 July 1077, which would give a very clear end date for the embroidery's completion. There is no document that records the gifting of the Tapestry at this time, but since it is known that it was displayed in the cathedral in the late fifteenth century, and it was also rediscovered there in the early eighteenth century, this seems a plausible theory.³¹

Using the resource pack

Topics linked to at KS3, GCSE, A-Level

KS3:

- National Curriculum, The Norman Conquest.

GCSE:

- Pearson Edexcel: Anglo-Saxon and Norman England, c.1060–88
- AQA Norman England, c.1066-c.1100
- OCR The Norman Conquest, 1065-1087

A-Level:

- OCR Anglo-Saxon England and the Norman Conquest, 1035–1107
 - Pearson Edexcel Anglo-Saxon England and the Anglo-Norman Kingdom, c.1053–1106
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³¹ David Musgrove and Michael Lewis, *The Story of the Bayeux Tapestry: Unravelling the Norman Conquest* (Thames & Hudson, 2021), ch. 2.

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- Gone Medieval, 'Bayeux Tapestry' (16 October 2021): <https://shows.acast.com/gone-medieval/episodes/thebayeuxtapestry>
- History Extra podcast series: <https://www.historyextra.com/podcast-series/bayeux-tapestry-exclusive-history-podcast-series/>
- History Extra, 'Long Reads: How many Bayeux Tapestries were there?' (2026): <https://open.spotify.com/episode/2mlriv7nH5btWb7Ua6bGP>
- You're Dead to Me, 'Bayeux Tapestry' (24 June 2022): <https://www.bbc.co.uk/sounds/play/p0cgn8tz>

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