

Trevor Rowley, An Archaeological Study of the Bayeux Tapestry. The Landscapes, Buildings and Places, Barnsley, South Yorkshire (Pen + Sword Books) 2016, XII–209 p., num. col. + b/w ill., ISBN 978-1-7819-380-6, GBP 25,00.

rezensiert von | compte rendu rédigé par
George T. Beech, Kalamazoo

In his introduction (p. X) the author, Trevor Rowley, explains his objective: »The main purpose of this book is to try and understand some aspects of the historical geography in which the tapestry is placed. Where did the momentous events portrayed actually take place and how much can the hanging tell us about the landscape of mid-eleventh-century France and England?« Also in his introduction he explains that: »I have interpreted archaeology very broadly to include the historic landscape«, thus acknowledging that his book is not archaeology as the term is usually understood, i. e. a study of material remains from the past.

In the first chapter Trevor Rowley summarizes existing beliefs as to the date and place of its production, and about who may have commissioned it. In addition to these questions comes a summary of the structure, the materials and colors used, the types of people and animals depicted, as well as the landscapes, trees, buildings, churches, boats, castles, etc. Also, references to the artistic and historical sources from which the designer may have borrowed in picturing events, with particular emphasis on what he believes to have been the importance of Roman sculpture surviving in the 11th century.

In chapters two through nine the author examines the successive episodes central to the story as a whole. In the course of his analysis he looks into the unknowns of the tapestry and summarizes the various explanations made by modern scholars. In chapter 2, Earl Harold's Journey to Bosham, he examines the identity of the castle where King Edward of England talked with Harold at the outset and the nature of the instructions the king gave to him. Then Harold's trip to Bosham, the hunting scene en route, his praying before the church there, then his dining with his men in the building nearby. Chapter 3: Harold's voyage across the channel to France, the type of boat he sailed in, why and how he happened to land in Ponthieux where he was captured by Count Guy. How Guy turned him over to Duke William of Normandy who led Harold to his Norman castle presumably in Rouen.

Chapter 4: Castles and the Breton Campaign. Rowley has doubts about the authenticity of this campaign: »The whole of the Breton campaign, which provides a military prelude to the battle of Hastings, is as spectacular as it is unbelievable, despite the detail that is shown on the tapestry« (p. 72). Nonetheless he examines certain aspects of it in considerable detail, particularly the structure of the Breton castles portrayed – Dol, Rennes, Dinan, along with two others at Bayeux and Hastings in England. And despite his earlier reservations he concludes that they are significant visual representations of early motte-and-bailey castles (p. 97). He also devotes considerable time to the tapestry's depiction of Mont-Saint-Michel and the abbey church at the beginning of the Breton campaign, and is persuaded that the tapestry's designer was acquainted personally with that site.



Herausgegeben vom Deutschen
Historischen Institut Paris | publiée
par l'Institut historique allemand



Publiziert unter | publiée sous
[CC BY 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/)

In chapter 5 Trevor Rowley looks into the scene where Harold is pictured swearing an oath to Duke William, seeking to answer the question, what kind of an oath did Harold take, i. e. what did he swear to William, and where he takes it – in Bayeux cathedral? And what were the relics he was touching? This sequence ends with Harold leaving Duke William, sailing back to England, then going to report to King Edward. What interests Rowley is to know where in England Harold landed, then where he met the king, presumably in one of the royal palaces, and what Harold told King Edward, and how the latter reacted.

After this consultation the tapestry passes, in reverse order, to the king's illness as he consults with others, then his death. In the preceding scene his body is being taken to Westminster for burial. In chapter 6 Trevor Rowley is interested in the tapestry's depiction of Westminster abbey and in the probable subject of the king's discussion with followers; was he naming Harold as his successor? After Edward's death and funeral the tapestry turns to Harold's coronation as successor to King Edward, then his subjects being startled by the appearance of a strange star in the sky – the so-called »Halley's comet scene«. The coronation scenes end with news of Harold's succession being carried by boat to Duke William's court in Normandy without naming, as Rowley points out, the ports of departure and arrival.

In chapter 7 the author discusses William of Normandy's preparations for an invasion of England. First the construction of ships for the channel crossing: here he focusses on the detailed presentation of this in the tapestry, the felling of trees, making of planks, the tools used, etc. and he speculates about the total number built and used. Then follows the loading of the ships with horses, weapons, and the Norman warriors. The invasion of England began with the Norman crossing of the channel and, after landing unopposed at Pevensey, moving to Hastings nearby to prepare for a confrontation with the English under King Harold, just then returned from a victory over invading Vikings in northern England.

Trevor Rowley views the crossing over in chapter 8, the invasions, with particular attention to the ways in which the Normans brought their horses with them. In the final section of the book Trevor Rowley analyses the last part of the tapestry dealing with the decisive battle of Hastings where the Normans prevailed over the English. Where was the battle fought, how did the two armies confront each other, what were their respective tactics, what accounted for the Norman victory?

Accompanying the book are a number of maps of regions of northern France and England, and many high quality color photos of scenes from the tapestry, as well as of pages of illuminated manuscripts and of modern photos of buildings and regions cited by the author. Unfortunately there is no index of either of these, so the reader must search for them page by page. Nor does the author give the numbers of the scenes he cites from the tapestry – as numbered by Stenton, by Wilson, and by the tapestry museum in Bayeux. And in at least one instance (p. 155) a photo of a medieval drawing is presented without any indication as to the archive or library from which it is taken.

More puzzling is the photo (p. 137) of an unnumbered scene (scene 24, Bayeux numeration) picturing Harold's return to England to see King Edward after taking his oath to Duke William. But the author's labelling of the scene reads: »News of Harold's coronation is taken across the English channel«, and that is the subject being discussed by him at the time, p. 136–137. The two scenes of ships crossing the channel have been



Herausgegeben vom Deutschen
Historischen Institut Paris | publiée
par l'Institut historique allemand



Publiziert unter | publiée sous
[CC BY 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)

confused; this one should show 34 not 24. A very brief bibliography – 4 pages – comes at the end of the book, and it may be trivial but I will point out that the names of two contemporary French medievalists are misspelled. Pierre Baudouin becomes Baudwin, and Sylvette Lemagnen becomes Lemangen. More disconcerting is the fact that some of the endnotes of the book, which refer to the full titles in the bibliography, cite authors and abbreviated titles which are not listed in the bibliography. For example Chapt. 1, note 20, reads »Howe, 2008, p. 16«, and note 23 is »Karkov, 2010, p. 157–168«. But no work of either author is cited in the bibliography. It is my impression (I have not attempted to verify this) that many of the endnotes fall into this category, thus that the bibliography is incomplete.

Trevor Rowley's purpose in this book is to see how accurately the tapestry portrays the physical world of the day in Normandy and England, the landscapes, fields, trees, buildings. On the whole he concludes, »that the tapestry mostly ignores the physical setting of the story« (p. 12), and »for the most part little attempt is made to illustrate details of the landscape in which the events on the tapestry take place« (p. 13). Consequently »we cannot use the tapestry as a handbook to the archaeology or landscape of the Normans ... but we are given acceptable impressions of those places and landscapes, and on occasion we do seem to be looking at a genuine landscape« (p. 190).

Nonetheless he agrees that the tapestry is a magnificent work of art and »a unique historical document« (p. 190). Thus despite his essentially negative findings he believes his examination has been worthwhile in detecting elements which enable at least a partial reconstruction of the landscapes, et al. Has Rowley made an original contribution to the understanding of the Bayeux Tapestry? Many of the landscape topics treated by him have been dealt with by earlier scholars, as he acknowledges, but I know of no other book on the tapestry quite like this one, and future historians may well find it useful.



Herausgegeben vom Deutschen
Historischen Institut Paris | publiée
par l'Institut historique allemand



Publiziert unter | publiée sous
[CC BY 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)