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Collegium Budapest fellowship research project

The Bayeux embroidery: antique sources, function and recipient

INTRODUCTION

The Bayeux embroidery is made up of the juxtaposition of different pieces of preserved embroidered linen canvas over 70 metres long and 59 centimetres wide. It portrays the invasion of England by William the Conqueror, who defeated Harold's English army at the Battle of Hastings in 1066. All of the moments in this epic tale are depicted: troops departing on campaign, crowd movements, negotiations, battlefields, sieges, treachery, and banquets. Latin captions describe the various events. But the hand wringing that indicates the imminent attack, the heads lowered in humiliation, and the surge of the ships cleaving through the waves are signs that need to be interpreted. All of this is enclosed by two borders. The upper one portrays fantasy animals, monsters or fables such as that of the fox and the crow, while the lower one depicts warriors and forms part of the story.

Since 2001, I have devoted part of my research and, in particular, my university doctoral research seminars to the study of the Bayeux embroidery, or rather to reflection on new ways of approaching the study of the document that possibly holds the greatest bibliography of all of the works of art from the Middle Ages¹.

When studying the poem by Baudri de Bourgueil, the abbot of Saint-Pierre de Bourgueil, written at the beginning of the XII century for Adela, the Countess of Blois and the daughter of William the Conqueror, I became

¹ The bibliography on the Bayeux Tapestry is extremely vast. The most useful references include: S. Bertrand, *La Tapisserie de Bayeux et la manière de vivre au onzième siècle*, Saint-Léger-Vauban, 1966; L. Musset, *La Tapisserie de Bayeux, œuvre d'art et document historique*, Saint-Léger-Vauban, 1989; W. Grape, *The Bayeux Tapestry: Monument to a Norman Triumph*, Munich/New York, 1994; S. Lewis, *The rhetoric of power in the Bayeux Tapestry*, New York, 1999; *La tapisserie de Bayeux, l'art de broder l'histoire*, proceedings of the Cerisy-la-Salle symposium, 1999, Caen, 2004; G. Beech, *Was the Bayeux Tapestry made in France: the case for St. Florent of Saumur*, New York, 2005.

interested in the description of the countess's chamber². The walls are covered with rich tapestries depicting Creation, the Garden of Eden, the Flood, episodes from the Old Testament, scenes from Greek mythology and Roman history and, near the bed, the conquest of England.

Over the past few years, I have published several preliminary studies³ and compiled the necessary documentation in order to write a book, for which I am requesting a Collegium Budapest fellowship.

CURRENT STATE OF THE RESEARCH AND PROBLEMS INVOLVED

The Bayeux embroidery is an iconographical source for the study of art and architecture at the end of the XI century, but also for the history of costume, daily life and ornamentations, for example. It also provides information on geography, the animal world and other aspects of mediaeval knowledge and imaginary. Above all, it has been used to reflect the military and royal history of the period. However, numerous questions persist as to the origin and *raison d'être* of this embroidery, and accepted interpretations to date tend to be called into question. This is particularly the case for the place in which it is thought

² X. Barral i Altet, *Poésie et iconographie: un pavement du XII^e siècle décrit par Baudri de Bourgueil*, in *Studies on Art and Archaeology in honor of Ernst Kitzinger, Dumbarton Oaks Papers*, 41, 1987, p. 41-54; id., *Le plafond cosmologique de la chambre de la comtesse Adèle de Blois d'après Baudri de Bourgueil*, in *Bulletin de la société nationale des Antiquaires de France*, édition-diffusion de Boccard, 1988, p. 85-92.

³ X. Barral i Altet, *La tapisserie de Bayeux*, in *Contre l'art roman ? Essai sur un passé réinventé*, Paris, 2006, pp.238-243; Id., *Un exemple d'historiografia europea al canvi de segle: el brodat de Bayeux*, in *Institut d'Estudis Catalans: cent anys de recerca històrico-arqueològica*, Barcelona 2007 (published in 2009); Id., *Chiese e paesaggio rurale in epoca romanica: qualche riflessione a partire dal ricamo di Bayeux*, in *Rural churches in transformation and the creation of the Medieval landscape (Zagreb-Motovun, International Research Center for Late Antiquity and Middle Ages)*, 2008 (*Hortus artium medievalium*, 14.2008), pp. 113-118; Id., *Observations sur l'organisation narrative de la broderie de Bayeux et ses rapports avec l'Antiquité*, in "Les cahiers de Saint-Michel de Cuxa", XXXIX, 2008, pp. 31-46.

that this work of art was intended, the reasons for the creation of such a masterpiece, and the historical accuracy of the account told.

The decoration of Romanesque buildings is a whole, comprising sculptures, paintings, mosaics and various objects, including wall hangings and tapestries. Although only a few rare examples have been preserved, these were relatively widespread, to the extent that a number of communities, be they civil or religious, but mainly the richer ones, owned them. Used to decorate walls, wall coverings or tapestries were popular in the Middle Ages, at least as much as paintings. It was common practice to hang historiated fabrics, the iconography of which combined biblical cycles and major poetic or historical themes, particularly from ancient legend, or epic subjects that could be borrowed from contemporary history. The Bayeux embroidery has a decorative structure that can be seen in Romanesque Bibles and certain painted churches, such as Saint-Savin-sur-Gartempe. It is still difficult to determine whether it is a perfectly contemporary account of the events, an illustration of events that had already taken place some years previously, or even a reconstruction of an event only experienced through other historical or iconographical sources. Finally, the debate is still open as to the place of production of the embroidery, as well as its intended use.

I do not think that the Bayeux embroidery was produced to decorate the apse of Bayeux cathedral. My studies lead me to believe that it was intended for a civil building, as a frieze decorating the upper part of the walls in a reception hall of a palace, or in a funerary building, similar to the mosaic frieze decorating the Late Antique Mausoleum of Centcelles (a new hypothesis that has never before been proposed).

METHOD AND OBJECTIVES

An essential part of my research has involved finding new methods to approach this figurative document.

These can be summarised as follows:

1. Close comparative study of the preserved embroidery and that described by the poet Baudri de Bourgueil.

2. General iconographical study, essentially comparing other preserved monumental decorations (older, contemporary and of a later date), particularly in terms of the architecture housing them, in order to put forward a new reasoned hypothesis on the place for which the embroidery was produced.
3. Study of classical sources. Indeed, a very significant part of my research seeks to shift the iconographical and intellectual sources of this work of art, which, in my view, can be understood not by looking towards the North and Scandinavia (which has usually been the case), but only in relation to the Mediterranean, Rome and monuments such as Trajan's Column.
4. Application of a new analysis method that I have developed (microanalyses), which involves in-depth comparative study of apparently insignificant details, such as a line, a gesture, colours, each object, animal or decoration, by itself and in relation to its most immediate iconographical context and other known examples.

RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

As in all Romanesque art, the theme of nature is omnipresent on this embroidery. Animals accompany the scenes throughout the length of the work and are included on the outer borders. As for the theme, there are three kinds of image: isolated animals, fables, and principal scenes flowing over into the margins. The bestiary is very present in mediaeval imaginary, either for its allegorical and moral value, or for its geographic value. Some animals are systematically associated to a place or a country. Creatures such as lions and elephants are depicted because of their exoticism, their belonging to a far-off, fascinating world. Reference is made through the portrayal of an animal to a real or imaginary country in a number of Romanesque geographical maps. This whole natural environment, which marks mediaeval thinking in the XI and XII centuries, can be seen fully in the Bayeux embroidery.

The means of portraying men and women is another good example of my research, since it illustrates how artists combined numerous methods in order to achieve their objectives. Certain characters are featured face-on, in a hieratic pose, which can be seen on certain large Romanesque sculpted tympanums. The effigy of abbot Durand in the cloister of Moissac, for example, is almost a contemporary of this embroidery. One also notes the positions that recall those featured in illuminated manuscripts, even the older ones, such as the Utrecht Psalter, and representations that combine frontal and lateral positions, characteristic of the Romanesque style of representation. A great deal can also be learnt from the interaction between the characters, in terms of gestures of friendship or war.

The narrative dynamic of this embroidery, which provides remarkable clarity as to the sense of movements and feelings, makes it a kind of *chanson de geste*, comparable to that told by the contemporary troubadour.

In general, embroidery commissioners and artists of this embroidery do not look towards Scandinavia, but turn towards Rome, as proven by a number of examples that I am studying: the journey made by Sigeric of Canterbury to Rome, those of Oliba from Ripoll (who copied the Roman Pantheon in his cathedral of Vic), Bernward of Hildesheim, who commissioned a bronze interpretation of the Roman triumphal columns of Trajan and Marcus Aurelius for his cathedral, Poppo, Patriarch of Aquileia, and many other princes of the Church and secular lords during the course of the XI century and later on in the XII century.

By studying each micro motif individually, I am trying to better understand real life, the cultural context and the aspirations of the commissioners through the instructions that they gave to the artists. In order to do so, I have found numerous scenes of identical detail on other monuments, studied the rhythm of the architectures and, above all, the way of separating scenes, the elements of separation, in order to understand iconographical continuity and ruptures.

The main points of interest in this detailed approach are as follows: movement, visual strategies, effects of perspective, depth, proportions, shadows, colours, character format, the depiction of feet, pointed fingers, looks, beards, and the dead, with their heads and limbs chopped off. With regard to

the particular areas in which I have carried out in-depth monographical research, I should like to mention the heads at the window in scene 24, marine areas and fish, borders, animals alone or in pairs, the absence of an upper border in the sea battle and the absence of an upper border at various points, the existence of principal scenes that go over the border, details of the lines going over the borders, the direction of the vertical and oblique bands of the borders, restorations carried at the hand of the clerk in the famous Aelfgyva scene and the iconography of this scene.

WORK AT THE COLLEGIUM BUDAPEST

I am requesting a research stay at the Collegium Budapest in order to write the final draft of a work, based on the documentation already compiled, that should be of interest to all Mediaevalists, historians, art historians and literary historians. In order to write this, I am seeking the intellectual atmosphere of the Collegium, as I experienced this during a seminar in which I participated several years ago. Also, working at the Collegium and in Budapest should help me to fill in all of the gaps in my work relating to sources, monuments and the bibliography concerning Central and Eastern Europe. My research subject lends itself particularly to the place. This stay would also enable me to strengthen intellectual links with the Hungarian scientific community and the universities of Budapest.