Councilor, Combatant, Least of All Cleric: Bishop Odo’s Vanity and the Bayeux Tapestry

Jennifer Wright, History, Dr. Lillian Joyce, Art History

Overview
The Bayeux Tapestry is an embroidery that details the 1066 Norman conquest of England from the invaders' perspective. There is no surviving contemporary account of the Bayeux Tapestry and it remained in obscurity within Bayeux Cathedral for centuries. Bishop Odo of Bayeux, the half-brother of William the Conqueror, was a minor figure in many of the written texts of the Norman Conquest yet in the Bayeux Tapestry Odo is displayed as a key figure throughout the narrative. Odo was displayed by name as a warrior and a trusted advisor of the king but not as a bishop. Later in life, he attempted to take William’s armies to seize the papacy. This caused his imprisonment until his brother’s death.

Key Findings
Bishop Odo, half-brother of William the Conqueror, was most likely the patron who commissioned the Bayeux Tapestry. The Bayeux Tapestry displays scenes in which Odo's importance is over-exaggerated. If he was the patron, Odo seemingly presented himself this way to satisfy his vanity and hint at his ambition to be more than a bishop. Odo wanted to be seen as a warrior and political player.

Impact
My research expands upon our understanding of the relationship between Odo and William the Conqueror. The collaboration of patron, designers, and artists humanized these figures and allowed Odo to build an image of himself that didn’t really exist.

Explanation
Many scholars have linked Odo to the patronage of the Tapestry. My new contribution is to highlight his reluctance to be cast solely as a pious clergyman. In the Bayeux Tapestry, Odo manipulated the narrative to present himself as a warrior, and the king’s councillor. This is evidence that Odo was unsatisfied as a bishop and wished to be in a position of greater power.

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