

FICHE DE COURS : The Bayeux Tapestry

Place dans les programmes du lycée : la tapisserie de Bayeux n'a pas vraiment sa place dans les programmes du lycée au regard des textes officiels. Cette séance est principalement motivée par une volonté de tirer parti de ce document patrimonial exceptionnel qui rencontre si bien l'ambition inter-culturelle des programmes de la Section Européenne. Par ailleurs, il peut avantageusement venir combler un vide en classe de Seconde, au moment où le programme d'histoire en français aborde la Méditerranée au XII^e siècle, sujet qui engage peu le monde anglo-saxon (à moins de travailler, ce qui est possible, sur la troisième croisade, Richard Cœur de Lion, et Robin des Bois entre mythe et réalité historique). Je choisis donc ici de prendre la tapisserie de Bayeux comme exemple de la relative souplesse et liberté d'initiative qui est offerte par la DNL dans notre effort d'adapter les programmes, tout en soulignant qu'elle ne présente pas le meilleur exemple d'orthodoxie pédagogique.

Objectifs de contenu et linguistique : cela étant dit, les objectifs sont très riches et satisfont pleinement les attentes de la Section Européenne : présentation d'une source historique et artistique, véritable document patrimonial, à la croisée des histoires nationales française et anglaise, présentation des lexiques très riches de la guerre et de la religion, réflexion sur les rapports entre religion et pouvoir politique.

Place dans le plan du cours : deux heures seront sans doute nécessaires à l'exploitation des extraits de la tapisserie que je propose ici. Six extraits, tous distribués en même temps au début du cours (voir les documents plus bas), sont étudiés à travers deux sous-parties, l'une narrative, l'autre plus problématisée :

I – The story : how William, Duke of Normandy, became king of England

II – Religion and power in the Tapestry : a political document

The Norman Invasion (1066) through the Bayeux Tapestry

- A foreword is necessary to introduce the historical context :

On January 5th, 1066, the king of England, Edward, of Anglo-Saxon descent, died without an **heir**. Many possible successors **fought over** the throne, among which an **earl** from Edward's court in London, **Harold Godwinson**, a foreigner, **William, duke of Normandy**, who was a friend of Edward's. **On December 25th 1066**, William was eventually crowned king of England, after defeating Harold at the **battle of Hastings**. He founded a royal dynasty which still rules over England today.

- A foreword is necessary to present the source :

In Bayeux is kept an **almost 70 meter long piece of fabric**, well known as the 'Bayeux tapestry'. It tells the story of the struggle for power between the two men, as would a comic strip. A legend has it that Mathilde, William's wife, made the tapestry (in fact, an embroidery), but it was actually **ordered in 1070 by Odo of Contenville, bishop** of Bayeux and William's half brother.

I – The story : how William, Duke of Normandy, became king of England (documents 1 to 4)

Ici, **l'utilisation exclusive de documents iconographiques permet de faire reposer tout le cours sur la participation orale des élèves**. Face à des documents comme le document 1, qui décrivent des actions à la fois simples et peu explicites pour les élèves, on pourra, en fonction du profil de la classe, expérimenter deux approches : par **une question vaste et générale** ne posant aucun problème de compréhension et permettant des réponses libres et spontanées, du type :

Q – Look at document one : describe the scene as precisely as you can. What seems to be taking place here ?

Les réponses nécessiteront alors un tri de la part du professeur, qui reportera au tableau au fur-et-à-mesure les éléments pertinents, et donnera les mots-clefs manquants. La trace écrite sera alors constituée d'une remise en forme des éléments sélectionnés au tableau.

Au contraire, on pourra préférer **une série de questions bien calibrées** destinées à canaliser les réponses et faciliter la construction de la trace écrite. À noter qu'en général, la première solution ne dispense pas vraiment le professeur de préparer la deuxième, et on recommandera de **garder une grande souplesse à la fois dans la formulation et dans l'enchaînement des questions** :

Q 1 – Describe the character on the left-hand side : what is he sitting on ? What is he carrying ?

A 1 – He is sitting still, on a throne, which puts him in a higher position than the others. He is holding / carrying a sword, a symbol of power, and wearing a cape. He is William, Duke of Normandy.

Q 2 – Now describe the character on the right : what is he doing ?

A 2 – The other is bending over in respect ; he is stretching his hand, reaching for something ; in fact, he is Harold Godwinson, solemnly swearing an oath to William. An oath is a solemn promise.

Q 3 – What is the item in-between them two ?

A 3 – It might be / it may be / seems to be / it is probably a / it is likely to be / it is undoubtedly / I reckon it is a / I guess / I assume / I suppose it is a... chest, containing some relics.

Q 4 – According to you, what might have Harold sworn to William ?

A 4 – That he would not attempt to take over the throne of England after Edward's death, that he would let William be king, that he would not betray him.

Remarque sur **la place et l'utilisation du lexique courant non-technique** : il ne faut pas oublier que s'il s'agit d'un cours d'histoire, **l'expression linguistique usuelle doit aussi faire l'objet d'un effort particulier**, et il faut veiller à consolider et enrichir le vocabulaire 'non-technique' des élèves. En Q1 par exemple, on s'attachera à **varier les synonymes** de 'tenir', 'porter' (une épée) ; Q3 offre une bonne occasion de **travailler la forme de l'hypothèse et de la supposition** ; en Q4, si l'on donne le verbe 'betray', il est bon de **donner les substantifs** 'betrayal', 'traitor', ou des synonymes ('to cheat'...). Mais attention, **il faut bien mesurer la quantité lexicale nécessaire et suffisante**, car des mots du vocabulaire courant comme 'reaching' 'stretching', 'to bend over', 'to hold', ainsi que des mots apparemment « transparents » comme 'throne' peuvent ne pas du tout être acquis ou compris à l'oral par une grande partie de la classe de Seconde, ce qui risque de retarder et d'alourdir considérablement le déroulement du cours : pour éviter cela, et ne pas alourdir la liste du vocabulaire usuel non-technique dispensé en cours, **il faut savoir simplifier l'expression sur le vif** : si le seuil des élèves est atteint, on utilisera 'he has a sword' plutôt que 'he holds', etc.

II – Religion and power in the Tapestry : a political document

Q 1 – Look at documents 5 and 6, paying particular attention to the upper part of the pictures : what do these scenes depict ?

A 1 – Document 5 shows a hand coming down from Heaven : it is the hand of God coming as a blessing, witnessed by a Norman as he was fixing a weather cock on top of William's castle. Document 6 shows a shooting star. Historians calculated that the Halley comet, which course can be seen from earth every 75 years or so, did cross the sky that very same year (1066). Below, Harold's counsellor informs him on the event.

Q 2 – What, according to you, might have been the significance of this star to Harold ?

A 2 – On document 6 Harold looks worried. Indeed, such exceptional phenomena, that the scientific knowledge of the time could not account for, were usually considered highly meaningful by popular superstition. Here, the passing of the comet was interpreted as a bad sign for Harold, a bad omen.

Q 3 – Judging from documents 1, 2, 3, 5 and 6, what can you say about the importance of religion in the Tapestry and in the Middle Ages in general ?

A 3 – The oath on the holy relics, the burial, the coronation of Harold by an archbishop at Westminster Abbey, and the hand of God, all testify of the way religion connected with every domain of life and politics in the Middle Ages. The Tapestry particularly insists on that.

Q 4 – Judging from its length, where was the Tapestry meant to be displayed ? Who got to see it ?

A 4 – This 70 meter long masterpiece was made to be displayed in the nave of the Bayeux cathedral, so that everyone could see it. It was ordered in 1070 by Odo of Conteville, bishop of Bayeux, William's half-brother, and newly appointed Duke of Kent after the Norman conquest. The Tapestry was hung publicly for the first time in 1077 on the opening of Odo's new church, and was displayed there at least once a year during four centuries. Highly illustrated, featuring only few words, it enabled the least educated to understand its purpose.

Q 5 – From a religious and moral point of view, what seem to be the messages delivered by the Tapestry to the people who saw it ?

A 5 – The Tapestry seems to have born strong religious messages to whoever saw it : first, because of his perjury, Harold was bound to lose the battle as a punishment : although he is not clearly identified in the final scene (the matter is debated), he is eventually shown at Hastings killed by an arrow stuck through his eye. The Tapestry was therefore a strong moral example urging people to be true to their word and never lie.

Consequently, the Tapestry clearly purports to show that God was on William's side. An additional excerpt from the Tapestry could show that William used crossed flags during his crossing of the Channel, indicating that he waged war with the Pope's support, which made William's action look perfectly legitimate.

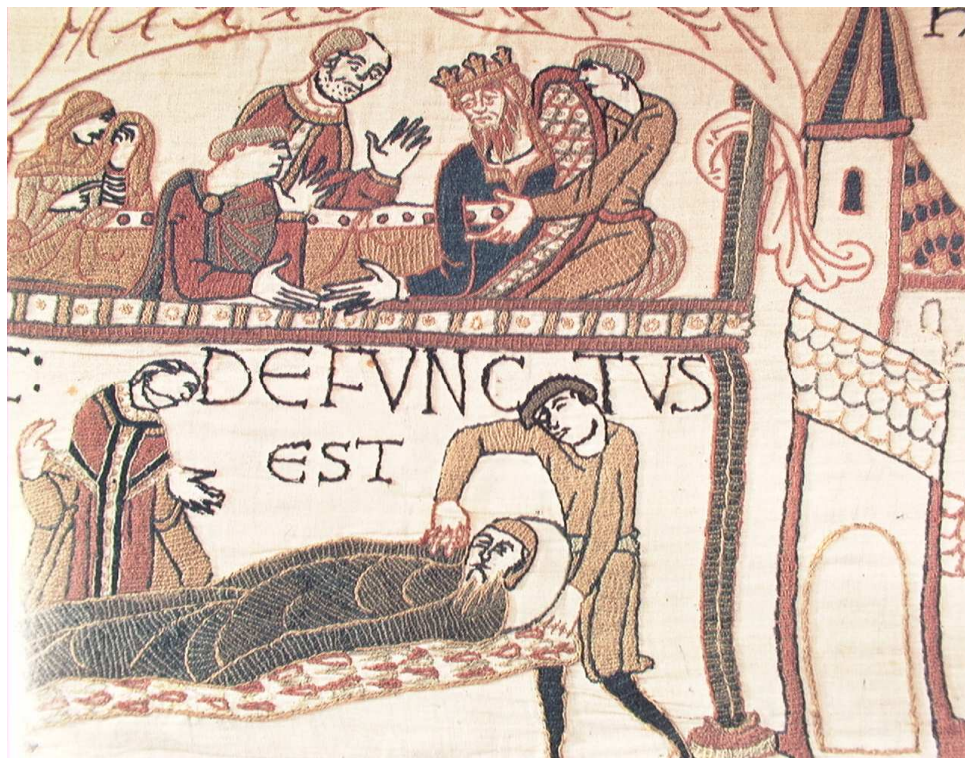
The last message conveyed here is that, not only did William rightfully seek the English throne, his kingly power was also an expression of God's will : the Tapestry is a good illustration of the medieval conception of the king's political power as divine. Moreover, on a political point of view, it also stresses the importance of the loyalty oath (pledge of allegiance) : this political and personal bound was the corner-stone of the feudal system.

In conclusion, one could say that the Tapestry was all at once a history book, a moral preach, a political propaganda... and a masterpiece of eleventh century art.

Doc. 1 – Harold Swears the Oath to William (1064)



Doc. 2 – King Edward Dies and is Buried at Westminster Abbey



Doc. 3 – Harold is Crowned King of England in Westminster



Doc. 4 – « Portant armas ad naves » : William setting up the invasion



Doc. 5 – The Hand of God



Doc. 6 – The comet

