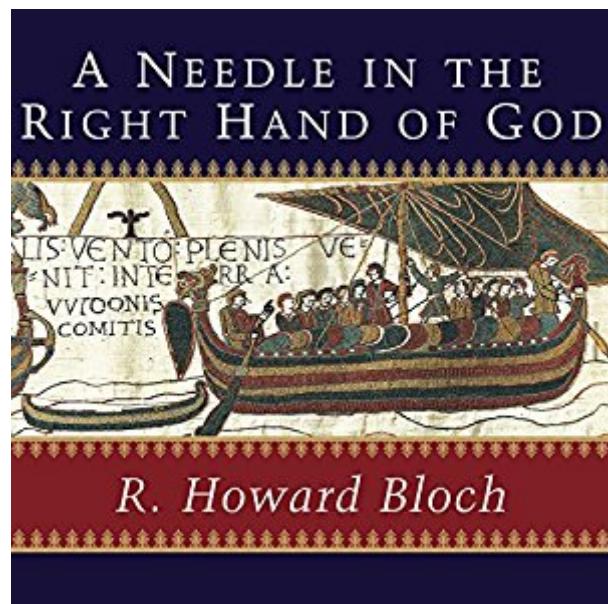


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# A Needle In The Right Hand Of God



## Synopsis

The Bayeux Tapestry is the world's most famous textile—an exquisite 230-foot-long embroidered panorama depicting the events surrounding the Norman Conquest of 1066. It is also one of history's most mysterious and compelling works of art. This haunting stitched account of the battle that redrew the map of medieval Europe has inspired dreams of theft, waves of nationalism, visions of limitless power, and esthetic rapture. In his fascinating new book, Yale professor R. Howard Bloch reveals the history, the hidden meaning, the deep beauty, and the enduring allure of this astonishing piece of cloth. Bloch opens with a gripping account of the event that inspired the Tapestry: the swift, bloody Battle of Hastings, in which the Norman bastard William defeated the Anglo-Saxon king, Harold, and laid claim to England under his new title, William the Conqueror. But to truly understand the connection between battle and embroidery, one must retrace the web of international intrigue and scandal that climaxed at Hastings. Bloch demonstrates how, with astonishing intimacy and immediacy, the artisans who fashioned this work of textile art brought to life a moment that changed the course of British culture and history. Every age has cherished the Tapestry for different reasons and read new meaning into its enigmatic words and images. French nationalists in the mid-nineteenth century, fired by Tapestry's evocation of military glory, unearthed the lost French epic "The Song of Roland," which Norman troops sang as they marched to victory in 1066. As the Nazis tightened their grip on Europe, Hitler sent a team to France to study the Tapestry, decode its Nordic elements, and, at the end of the war, with Paris under siege, bring the precious cloth to Berlin. The richest horde of buried Anglo-Saxon treasure, the matchless beauty of Byzantine silk, Aesop's strange fable "The Swallow and the Linseed," the colony that Anglo-Saxon nobles founded in the Middle East following their defeat at Hastings—all are brilliantly woven into Bloch's riveting narrative. Seamlessly integrating Norman, Anglo-Saxon, Viking, and Byzantine elements, the Bayeux Tapestry ranks with Chartres and the Tower of London as a crowning achievement of medieval Europe. And yet, more than a work of art, the Tapestry served as the suture that bound up the wounds of 1066. Enhanced by a stunning full-color insert that includes reproductions of the complete Tapestry, *A Needle in the Right Hand of God* will stand with *The Professor and the Madman* and *How the Irish Saved Civilization* as a triumph of popular history. --This text refers to an out-of-print or unavailable edition of this title.

## Book Information

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## **Customer Reviews**

Very thorough. I liked the fact that author's mother was an embroiderer and that father in the textile business. Even after all the research it's still a mystery as to who commissioned, who designed and who executed the work.

I'm only 1/3rd of the way through the book so far, but Mr. Bloch is presenting many unexpected threads and drawing them all towards the Bayeaux Tapestry. Interesting. I'm waiting for the CD-ROM I ordered to arrive so I can examine the plates as I read.

Hard to rate, because the parts that were fascinating rocked. The sections less interesting to me... well, not sure it was the fault of the author. And I might have found them more interesting in print and with illustrations, assuming there were some. My attention wandered a bit with the audio CD, and I might have missed some great parts, also. The parts where I drifted: stitchery, linen, etc. Though when he connected it to the history of trading relationships and whether flax might have been native to Normandy and Britain I did perk up. The parts I loved were the discussions about the interactions among the Norman, Viking, and Anglo-saxon cultures, and also discovering how widespread the Norman culture was prior to Hastings. I didn't realize that Normans controlled so much of Italy, for instance, or had penetrated so far into the Middle East. The medieval world was far more complicated and sophisticated than we often realize. It's interesting how we're conditioned to see the ages as so DARK and dreary, and then poof, along comes about the year 1000 and everything's flooded in sunshine. We have the poet Taillifer's sword flashing in the light as he

juggles it before Harold's amassed troops, declaiming the Song of Roland. Apparently the troops are so awestruck at this sight and sound, they allow him to decapitate a prominent knight before the battle is met. I mean. Those parts I just loved. And I did come to see the Tapestry in my mind's eye, which may be as close as I come IRL. If otherwise, I will allot a couple of days for a closer examination. And now I'm very much looking forward to Bloch's book on Marie de France.

It's said that the Devil can quote Scripture to prove his own point - and something like that has been tried with the Bayeux Tapestry, which depicts the Norman Conquest of England. The French claim it as French. The English have claimed it as Anglo-Saxon. During World War II, Hitler tried to use it as a kind of Book of Genesis for the Third Reich. William the Conqueror, 7th Duke of Normandy, was the descendant of Vikings. ("Norman" derives from the Latin for "Northmen.") The Scandinavian connection appealed to Hitler's racial, mythic notions. Among the Tapestry's 11th century images of conquering warriors, he sought ancient origins for his supposed Germanic super-race. In fact, maintains R. Howard Bloch, these competing claims are only possible because the Tapestry itself hardly takes sides between the conquered Anglo-Saxons and the conquering Normans, and seeks to reconcile those whom it portrays. Its point of view is neither clearly Norman nor Anglo-Saxon. Without dwelling on fixing blame, it shows both armies fighting bravely. ("French and English fall together," it says of the battle at Hastings.) All may go on to become King William's peaceful subjects. Bloch finds in the Tapestry's well-recognized ambiguities an intention by its designer to tell the story without maligning either Normans or Anglo-Saxons. Sterling Professor of French and the Director of the Humanities Division at Yale, as well as author of several books about the Middle Ages, Bloch brings an unusual array of qualifications to this subject. His mother, formally trained as a textile engineer, was a craftswoman who covered the walls of their home with creative needlework; his father an expert in the manufacture of finished cloth. In considering the Tapestry, its purposes and the influences it reflects, especially those found in other woven, painted or embroidered fabrics, Bloch speaks the language of textiles as one born to it. He points out from the beginning, as all writers on the Bayeux Tapestry must, that it isn't strictly a tapestry at all, but an embroidery, on a long (about 230 feet) linen strip; and that we have no other record like it. Despite the crude medieval drawing, the Tapestry vividly brings alive the sweep of events. The most photorealistic horses, for example, could not pulse with more vitality, or fall in battle more convincingly, than they do in these images. In the Tapestry's unfolding story, we see the Anglo-Saxon Harold Godwineson swear his oath of loyalty to Duke William. It doesn't tell us whether he had a choice, or was tricked. Is King Edward the Confessor of England, on his deathbed,

revoking his promise of the crown to his kinsman, Duke William of Normandy? Promising it to Harold? There sits Harold in majesty, crowned -- if it was with indecent haste, the Tapestry doesn't say so -- the day after Edward's death. Duke William "is told of Harold," the Tapestry tells us neutrally, and he prepares to invade. There is the mysterious woman, Aelfgyva. With generations of scholars we wonder who she is, and why she is here. Is that cleric merely touching her head, or slapping her so that she'll never forget something she's witnessing? The images quicken their pace, reaching the bloody clash at Hastings and the Norman victory. Something is missing at the end of the Tapestry; perhaps the lost portion showed King William in majesty, matching the earlier crowned and enthroned Harold. Professor Bloch understands the Tapestry with an appreciation of what may be called the southern angle: that the Normans who had campaigned in or been to the Italian peninsula, Sicily, the Holy Land, Constantinople, brought back with them both novel combat tactics and a network of cultural threads that linked their northern homeland with Byzantium and with the whole Mediterranean world. He points out not only the family Scandinavian links of style and motif with the Tapestry, but those found in sumptuous Byzantine silks, proposing lights for what have been obscure corners of Tapestry interpretation. In so doing, he gives greater attention to the enigmatic borders of the Tapestry -- those often-cryptic passages above and below the main narrative -- than do some other commentators. He argues that the Tapestry deliberately leaves crucial questions unanswered. It means to withhold one-sided judgments. The Tapestry does NOT tell us whether Harold swore fealty to William willingly, or whether he knew he was holding his hands outstretched over sacred relics, making the oath a much more serious matter. It leaves unstated, not alone what King Edward intended at the last, but what it was in his power to do. Though the evidence suggests that English hands made the Tapestry, it is NOT clear whose voice, so to speak, tells the story. The Tapestry, Bloch maintains, is not a work of partisan propaganda. King William, he says, wanted Anglo-Saxons and Normans reconciled under his unifying rule -- and wanted the wider world to acquiesce in his dreams of even wider empire. Without knowing for sure when or where the Tapestry was made, or by whom ordered, or where it was designed to be displayed, Bloch says, we can find all this on its face. It's an argument that anyone interested in the Norman Conquest, the events surrounding it and those that flowed from it, should want to consider; and it is engagingly written. I couldn't put it down. Its story is, of course, still relevant -- to, among much else, the fact that Prince William of England will someday be King William V because he'll be counting from King William I, the Conqueror.

Another very interesting, fascinating book on the Bayeux Tapestry. This one singularly free of any

judgement, guesswork, supposition. Far more scholarly and detailed than anything I have yet read. Block is a Yale professor and it shows. Such a source of endless interest. He goes into more detail on the border of the Tapestry, and the possible meanings of all the various depictions found there than anyone else I have read. Block tells us more about how it was made, what it was made from, the colors, the dyes, etc. than any other author that I am aware of. And relates it to the illustrated manuscripts, Byzantine influence, and talks about the Master who designed it. He also gives much more detail about the Viking boats, Hitler's interest in it, and its narrow escape from being carried off to Germany. It is the world's most famous textile, 230 feet long. Block contends that it is meant to be viewed as a panorama - moving the eye along much like a cartoon of today.

JB Lyle's review (I recommend you read it) says it all and better than I could. I would only add that having to flip back and forth from text to photographs is very tedious but essential. I realize the cost of reproducing photographs and inserting them near the text every time a panel is mentioned would be prohibitive, and I accept that reality. However, I wish (and recommend to serious readers) I had also purchased a book with larger pictures of the tapestry to keep at my side for reference while reading this fascinating account.

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