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Kingship-in-Death in the Bayeux Tapestry

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The interpretation of the purpose of the Bayeux tapestry hinges on two key scenes, Harold's oath-taking at Bayeux and the death-bed of King Edward. Both scenes are highly ambiguous and both have been brought forward to support party-political claims, in favour of either the Norman or the English faction. This article argues that, in fact, the tapestry explicitly avoids endorsing a view of history that supports one ethnic team over the other, seeking instead a narrative that emphasizes their common interests. The indisputable fact, in the years after the Conquest, was that the Normans ruled the country and that therefore, from the perspective of Christian hindsight, God must have given it to them and taken it away from the English.[1] The tapestry takes for granted this providential view of history and seeks a conciliatory reading in which the crucially important part of the narrative of recent events is the safe passage of the crown and the function of anointed kingship from one worthy figure, Edward, to another, William. Edward is set up as an image of static perfection, an icon of kingship, against which the flawed and variable figure of Harold is measured and found wanting. The designer's fascination with concepts of kingship emerges most clearly in the scenes of the dying and death of Edward which are the focus of this discussion.

Reactions to the death of King Edward

The death of a king is always a period of crisis, even when succession is assured, much more so when the future of his kingdom is in dispute. At a time of extreme stress, powerful images of institutional continuity provide a source of reassurance: the Bayeux tapestry may have provided just such an image, and a highly visible one at that. To quote an anthropological study of kingship among the Dinka and Shilluk peoples of Sudan:

> the most powerful symbol for the continuity of any community, large or small, simple or complex, is, by a strange and dynamic paradox, to be found in the death of its leader, and in the representation of that striking event.[2]

The death of King Edward provoked a range of responses, culminating eventually in his canonisation as Edward the Confessor in 1161; a more immediate response was the writing of the anonymous text known as the *Vita Eadwardi*. The *Vita Eadwardi*, like the Bayeux tapestry, can be read as a study of the nature of kingship at a moment of crisis. In Barlow's widely-accepted reading, which divides the narrative into two books, Book i was written before Edward's death and the battles of 1066 as part of a campaign to have Harold generally acknowledged as Edward's heir.[3] This section of the work is full of incident and detail, narrating Edward's reign together with the adventures of Godwin and his sons Harold and Tostig in particular. Book ii, on the other hand, is thought to have been written after the deaths of the Godwinsons at Stamford Bridge and Hastings, in an attempt to recreate Edward as a saint. Book ii is very different in style and content from Book i, ignoring the historical context and replacing it with a string of very similar accounts of healing miracles before exploring the episode of Edward's dying, death and burial in considerable detail, in a mode which might be described as tentatively hagiographic. These contrasting ways of representing Edward, within the same text, suggest that kings and kingship were highly complex subjects.

Book ii of the *Vita Eadwardi* is often adduced as a source for the corresponding sections of the Bayeux tapestry;[4] if so, the tapestry's designer took a highly creative and critical approach to his material. While in the *Vita Eadwardi* the dying and death of Edward take up nearly five pages, they occupy only two scenes of the Bayeux tapestry. Its designer was faced with the challenge of packing one of the most important parts of his narrative into a few inches of embroidery; his solution was to construct these scenes in a particularly complex and economical way, the densest in the whole work, with the funeral seemingly happening before the death, and the dying and dead Edwards apparently cohabiting. This riddling presentation forces the tapestry's spectator to pause and ponder on the nature of kingship in death.

The Bayeux tapestry is likely to have been designed in a Canterbury monastery, and Francis Wormald has argued convincingly for St Augustine's on the basis of parallels in contemporary manuscript illuminations.[5] The tapestry's sophisticated intertextual references mean that it cannot be read as a simple reflection of eleventh-century political events or even as a reliable source of information about the details of everyday life at the time. Instead, it is necessary to approach the tapestry as a product of monastic culture and a narration of Christian history. The tapestry has often been described as 'secular',[6] but an ostensibly political narrative need not imply a secular narrator in a piece of embroidery any more than it does in a manuscript. In the period around the Norman Conquest Canterbury seems to have been something of a history factory: Brooks and Walker point out that one of the closest textual parallels to the tapestry's version of Harold's Norman expedition is Eadmer of Canterbury's *Historia Novorum* (written shortly after 1100) and that the author of the *Vita Eadwardi* also probably had Canterbury connexions.[7] Therefore there may well have been a common culture shared by the generators of both the words and the images under discussion here, and we should not expect the understanding of the death of the king to be any less sophisticated in the tapestry than it is in the *Vita Eadwardi*. The language of the image is not the same as the language of words, however, and the tapestry needs to be read carefully in terms of its elaborate symbolism and the ways in which the designer has manipulated time and space to convey complex ideas in his visual medium.

Kingship in Anglo-Saxon Art

By the later eleventh century, the depiction of contemporary kings in English works of art had a long history, dating back at least to the reign of Edgar and the period of the height of the Benedictine Reform in the late tenth century. A king, of course, is not simply someone who happens to be one step up the power hierarchy from a duke; he is a different category of person altogether, transformed by the ritual process of coronation into a representative of Christ on earth. The concept of Christ-identified kingship was at its height in England in the tenth and eleventh centuries, and the elements that went into the construction of the ideal of the early medieval king have been explored by, among others, Ernst Kantorowicz and Robert Deshman,[8] and their

insights into the nature of eleventh-century kingship will here be applied to these images of Edward.

Kantorowicz discusses medieval and early modern notions of kingship, centred around the theory that while the human being embodying the concept of kingship may die, the concept itself is immortal, transferring seamlessly from one individual to the next. The earliest text he discusses is an anonymous tractate of *circa* 1100, *De consecratione pontificum et regum*. This explores ideas of Christ-identified kingship that, Kantorowicz stresses, were already old-fashioned by 1100: the anonymous Norman author was 'a champion of ideals...of Anglo-Saxon England... he actually sums up the political ideas of the tenth and eleventh centuries'.[9] The author focuses on the idea of the *persona gemina* or *mixta*, which was used to understand the relationship between the sacred and the secular when they coincide in one body. He takes as his archetypes the kings and high priests of the Old Testament, describing them as having two persons, *una ex natura, altera ex gratia*.[10] By extension, Christian kings were the anointed representatives of Christ on earth: as Christ had two different kinds of essential being, so must the king in parallel. But the tractate also distinguishes between the political and divine roles of the ruler, on the one hand, and the individual person, on the other hand, taking as its example Tiberius Caesar, who may have been vile as Tiberius but was nonetheless venerable as Caesar. *De consecratione pontificum et regum*, then, in fact establishes *three* different identities for a king: his sacramental nature, his temporal power and his individual personality; this triple understanding of the king's nature is central to understanding the depiction of Edward's death in the tapestry.

Deshman, in an explicit critique of Kantorowicz's model, examines whether the christological ideal of kingship was prevalent in Anglo-Saxon England and Ottonian Germany from approximately 900 to 1100. He concludes that it was in fact the dominant mode of conveying the theory of kingship, redefined in England during the Benedictine Reform in the late tenth century, and performing an explicitly propagandistic function for kings such as Edgar and Cnut in images such as the New Minster Charter, the Benedictional of St Æthelwold and the New Minster *Liber Vitae*. At this time, as Deshman makes clear, the role of earthly monarch was not only identified with the roles of Christ the King and the priest, but also

took on elements of monastic ideology, exemplified above all in the *Regularis Concordia* and the New Minster Charter, in which the image of Edgar summarizes much of the Reform thinking about the nature of kingship.[11]

This investigation of the political and sacramental role of the monarch did not end with the period of the Reform but is also visible in the reign of Cnut. In the New Minster *Liber Vitae* (BL Stowe MS 944 f. 6r), there is an image of Cnut and his Norman queen, Emma, offering an altar cross to New Minster, Winchester, whose dedication was to St Mary and St Peter. Cnut is being crowned and Emma veiled by attendant angels; Christ in a mandorla hovers above the cross, with Mary to his right, above Emma, and Peter to his left, above Cnut. At the bottom, a row of arches frames a group of monks, presumably from the New Minster. In his discussion of this picture, Gerchow concentrates on the reciprocal exchange of gifts between the heavenly and earthly kingdoms, and the ways in which the image affirms the Danish Cnut's claim to the English throne.[12] The New Minster *Liber Vitae* draws together the elements of earthly and heavenly power that constitute the living king; its depiction of Cnut in life helps to contextualise the Bayeux tapestry's depiction of Edward in death, where those elements of power fly apart.

The Images of Living Kings in the Bayeux Tapestry

As the Bayeux tapestry is now, there are two kings pictured in it, Edward and Harold. The end is missing, with probably about two metres having been lost, and one much-postulated closing scene is the coronation of William, with a final image of William enthroned to balance the opening scene of Edward enthroned.[13] This would not only be symmetrical and therefore visually satisfying but would also closely associate the two kings if, as seems likely, the tapestry were arranged around the interior of a church or hall so that the end and the beginning were very close to one another, suggesting a cyclical as much as a linear narrative.

Kings are clearly distinguished from other temporal rulers in the symbolic vocabulary of the tapestry. It opens with an image of Edward the Confessor, crowned, enthroned, holding a sceptre, framed with an elaborate architectural canopy, with his feet on a stool. Some of these elements - the building, the stool, the throne - are representative of worldly status and power in general and are repeated in several images

of William and one of Guy of Ponthieu; others are regalia - the crown and the sceptre or rod - and designate kings exclusively: Edward and Harold are each shown with them twice. In addition, Edward is shown with crown but sceptreless on his death-bed, and Harold is shown not only with crown and sceptre but also with an orb in the depiction of his coronation. The same care is taken with titles: when Guy is introduced it is specifically as *comes* (count) and similarly, when we first see William and Harold, they are each described as *dux* (duke). In their later appearances, these members of the aristocracy may appear with or without titles. Edward is treated differently, being referred to as *rex* every time his name appears. Harold, however, does not merit this precision. In the coronation scene immediately after Edward's death, he is described as *rex Anglorum* but almost immediately afterwards as just 'Harold', although he is still displaying the royal attributes of crown and sceptre. After this Harold is referred to four times as *Harold rex* and three times as plain 'Harold'. This difference between the references to the two kings may imply a criticism of Harold's qualifications for kingliness, a subject explored in more detail below.

The Depiction of Edward

Can these theories of kingship shed any light on the death of the king as depicted in the Bayeux tapestry? It seems unlikely that the Bayeux tapestry presents any less complex an explication of kingship than the other tenth and eleventh century images of the king. In fact, the symbolic language of the tapestry offers a sophisticated reading both of the nature of kingship and of the effect of death on the kingly identity.

There are five representations of Edward *in toto*. As mentioned above, an image of Edward opens the whole work. He is shown with Harold and another man, and, while he appears to perform no narrative function, he is in fact crucial to our understanding of the story. In the first place, Edward represents England. Images of him bracket Harold's Norman adventure, contextualising the story geographically. In the second place, Edward also provides a context for Harold: he is a king's man, no lawless adventurer or exile. The second image of Edward is another royal icon, shown receiving Harold on his return from Normandy. Edward is not doing anything in these scenes other than representing kingship, a function reflected in the captions, which read

EDWARD REX and HAROLD DUX...VENIT AD EDWARDU [*sic*] REGEM.

After this, we are shown, in reverse chronological order, the scenes of Edward's funeral, his death-bed and his shrouding, followed by the presentation of the crown to Harold. It is not only the chronological order that is reversed here: the funeral procession, going from right to left, swims against the narrative's normal flow. This is one of several places in the tapestry where the narrative deviates from its usual left-to-right flow. This technique may well have been an established convention in the vocabulary of visual story-telling: Biddle compares the technique in the tapestry to a piece of late tenth or early eleventh century sculptural frieze from Winchester, which, he argues, shows episodes from the life of the hero Sigmund in which adjacent narrative scenes are pointing in different directions.[14] Gameson identifies five such scenes altogether in the tapestry; other than Edward's death-bed and burial, they are all scenes in which two figures or groups of figures encounter each other as they approach from different directions, or in which one approaches while the other stays still.[15] This is not the case, however, in the scenes of Edward's death and burial, and another explanation must be sought.

It has been argued by several commentators that the arrangement of the death-bed scene represents the designer having to make the best of a bad job. Both Gameson and Bernstein emphasize the causal connexion between Edward's dying words and Harold's coronation and claim this is sufficient grounds for the complex structure, but if the designer had wished to make this point with greater clarity there would have been other methods available to him. Bernstein illustrates his argument by rearranging the scenes so that they flow in the expected chronological order: (1) death-bed, (2) shrouding, (3) burial, (4) Harold being offered the crown; and he claims that this would mean 'Now that King Edward is dead we offer you the crown' rather than the actual meaning (in his reading): 'As Edward instructed in his last days, we hereby offer you the crown'.[16] This argument is invalid: Bernstein appears to assume that the images and captions actually used were the only possible designs available. Brooks and Walker suggest that the arrangement of the scenes reflects the speed at which events occurred, with Edward's death and burial and Harold's coronation happening within forty-eight hours, and again stress the importance of causality: 'Had the funeral scenes followed the death of King Edward in the

Tapestry, Harold's accession to the throne would have appeared widely separated from the death of the Confessor.'[17] Like Bernstein, they are underestimating both the artistic skills and the ingenuity of the designer, and the complexity of the ideas he is conveying. He did not use these scenes simply because they were the only ones available to him, and then juggle them around until they fell into a causally apt though chronologically inept pattern. Other options must have been available. He could, for example, have shown Edward handing the crown to Harold on the death-bed, or have omitted the scene of the shrouding and used a double-decker structure in which the death-bed took place in the upper register and the funeral in the lower. He could have used his access to the written word in the captions to make an unambiguous statement along the lines of HIC EDWARDUS DEDIT HAROLDO CORONAM, just as earlier we have HIC WILLELM DEDIT HAROLDO ARMA. The ambiguity of the scene stems less from our ignorance than from the designer's original intention.

As it stands, the structure of Edward's death scenes poses the same riddle in two different ways - how can a man be alive after his funeral, and how can he be alive and dead at the same time? One answer to this riddle might be 'when he is a saint', but - despite the tapestry's apparent dependence for this part of its story on the near-contemporary *Vita Eadwardi*, which explicitly argues for Edward's sanctity - Edward does not appear to be depicted as a saint in the tapestry. The other answer to the riddle, then, is 'when he is a king'. At the moment of death, the complex elements that make up the king - the political, the sacramental and the individual - fragment, flying off in different directions. Edward as corpse goes off to Westminster Abbey (Fig. 1), against the tapestry's flow, while the kingly aspect of Edward endures and passes on to Harold. Indeed, the whole of the rest of the tapestry recounts the struggle between Harold and William to attain genuine kingship of England, to assume that particular element of Edward's identity.

In addition, the designer uses a consistent visual language to show the movement of power, delineated in the tapestry by the numerical symmetry of Edward's five images. In two scenes he is alive and on his throne, in two he is a shrouded corpse and in one he is on his death-bed. This last-mentioned image comes after the funeral and physically positions the king in such a way as to show that he is on the boundary between life and death. He is wearing his crown, his

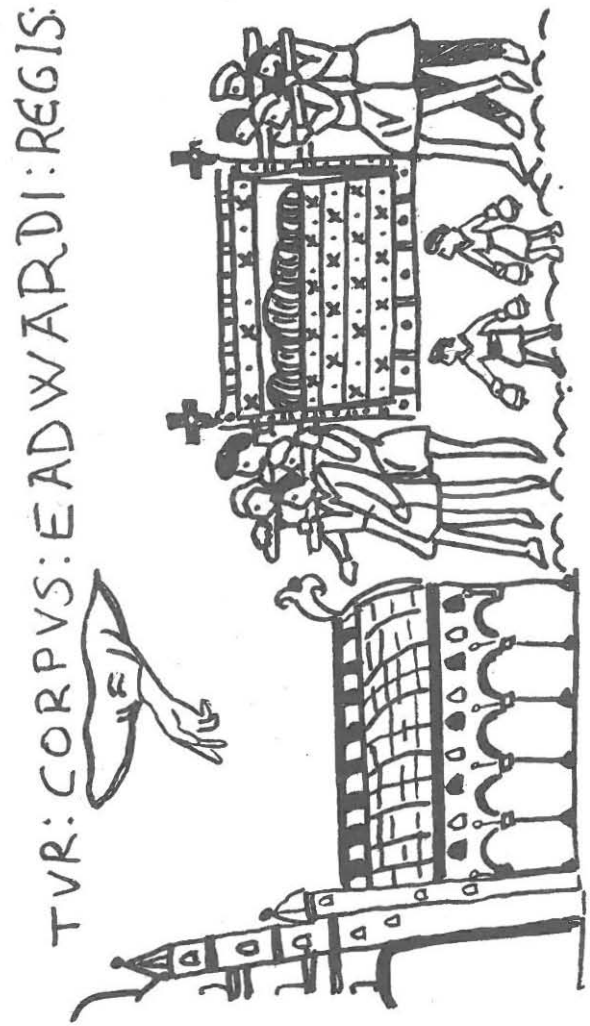

Figure 1.

upper body is vertical, and his right arm is gesturing, all in ways very similar to the position in which he is shown in the two pictures of him enthroned. However, his lower body is horizontal and entirely covered with material, as it is in the two pictures of his corpse. This state of being half-alive and half-dead is more powerful than colloquial use of those adjectives would usually imply. Edward is 'neither here nor there; [he is] betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention and ceremonial';[18] he is no longer the vertical king nor yet the horizontal corpse. In the following scene, Harold has assumed the upright, enthroned position of power.

The scene which is most closely connected spatially with Edward's death-bed is the scene immediately below it, of Edward's corpse, captioned ET HIC DEFUNCTUS EST (Fig. 2); both 'upstairs' and 'downstairs' the king has an attendant at his head who has his arms around him and a priest standing behind his body. The double-decker structure of this composition, with 'the perfect 'social' body above - the man in life - and the imperfect 'natural' body below',[19] is a striking foreshadowing of the cadaver or *transi* tombs of the later Middle Ages, and in fact it is to *transi* tombs that Binski is referring in the observation just quoted. There is no suggestion that there is any relationship between the tapestry and these tombs, which emerge in England *circa* 1400 out of a tradition of *gisant* tombs going back to the late twelfth century, and the idea of a life-like effigy accompanying royal corpses at funerals which is first observed in England in 1327.[20] Nonetheless, there is a strong iconographical resemblance, suggesting that the later tomb-designers and the earlier embroidery-designer reached similar solutions when faced with problems of representing identity and fragmentation.

In fact, the understanding of kingship-in-death is explored still further in these scenes. Edward is shown three times, in modes that correspond to the three different elements of kingship identified in the *De consecratione pontificum et regum*. On his death-bed, wearing his crown and surrounded by his *fideles* (among whom, following the *Vita Eadwardi*, can be identified Harold, Queen Edith and the pluralist Stigand, Archbishop of Canterbury), Edward represents temporal power. Below, humbled in death, stripped of his crown and all other symbols of rank, he is the vulnerable human being, the Everyman. On the left, contained by a bier powdered with crosses, escorted by seven tonsured men who may embody the seven penitential psalms,

Figure 2

advancing towards Westminster Abbey with the Hand of God descending from the sky, he represents the anointed Christian approaching salvation. By reversing the direction of the funeral procession, the designer emphasizes the separation of the king's different bodies at death. This representation may or may not bear any resemblance to the actuality of Edward's death-bed; what is being represented here is an ideal. Edward is the image of the Good King. Unlike the author of the *Vita Eadwardi,* the tapestry's designer does not criticise or even personify Edward in any way, he simply represents true kingship. In this, we may come to the core of the tapestry's concerns. If it is not chauvinistically pro-English or pro-Norman, if its vision is informed by a monastic understanding of history, then perhaps the grand theme of the tapestry is the institution of Christian kingship, and the way God has safeguarded that institution, ensuring, at the end, that there is still an anointed, Christian king on England's throne.

This reading may explain the puzzling vagueness in the death-bed scene where, it is generally assumed, Edward is either bequeathing the crown to Harold or entrusting Harold with its care until William, the rightful heir, turns up. If the designer had wanted explicitly to endorse either the English tradition, in which texts like the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle[21] and the *Vita Eadwardi* describe Harold as Edward's intended heir, or the Norman tradition, voiced by William of Jumièges[22] and William of Poitiers,[23] which gives that role to William, he would have been able to do so. Instead, his text is studiedly ambiguous: he tells us that Edward is speaking (*alloquitur*) but neither image nor caption tells us what was actually said. In which case, why bother to have this scene at all? What function does it perform?

We have already seen that, in order to convey the tripartite image of kingship-in-death, the designer needs representations of the political, the sacramental and the human faces of the king. This provides one rationalisation for the scene's inclusion. The other rationalisation is that the scene is necessary to signal continuity, but not continuity between Edward and Harold as individual exponents of kingship; instead his theme is seamless continuity of the institution of kingship. Hence the insistently kingly icon of Harold that follows, 'clearly designed' as Brooks and Walker note, 'by someone who knew the coronation *ordo*', with its elements of the offering of the sword of state, the presence of the orb as well as crown and sceptre, and the

Archbishop of Canterbury displaying the king to the acclamation of the people.[24] I would read this as meaning that the tapestry's designer, working with hindsight, might have preferred to stress the Anglo-Saxon tradition of Harold's legitimate claim to the throne, but he knew that Harold had, in the event, been deprived of both life and kingdom by his rival. Harold the individual *must* therefore have been unworthy of the role of king. In this case, to have emphasized Edward's nomination of Harold would have been to suggest that Edward had made a mistake, thus complicating his schematic representation of the ideal king with biographical details, dangerously implying criticism. Instead, the designer withdraws from his narrative, leaving a resounding silence in its most important scene.

If the tapestry is a biography of anyone, it is one of Harold. He is portrayed as heroic and worthy, but ultimately flawed, false and over-ambitious. The tapestry's story is, in essence, the tale of how Harold failed to live up to the ideal of kingship represented by Edward and was deprived of the throne as a result. His ignominious death, so different from Edward's, is the ultimate expression of this. David Bernstein sees the tapestry as 'dissenting', 'subtly irreverent' produced for a 'naive' patron, inscribing a subversively Anglo-Saxon perspective within a nominally Norman version of events;[25] I disagree. The function of the tapestry is one of reconciliation, not subversion; its stress on continuity is an attempt to reconcile conflicting points of view into one narrative, seeing recent events as evidence of the hand of God working within history and stressing the crucial point that, despite everything, England is still a Christian kingdom, still ruled by the Lord's anointed.

NOTES

[1] R. Gameson, 'The Origin, Art and Message of the Bayeux Tapestry' in *The Study of the Bayeux Tapestry*, ed R. Gameson, Boydell Press, Woodbridge, 1997, 157-211.

[2] R. Huntington and P. Metcalf, *Celebrations of Death: The Anthropology of Mortuary Ritual*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1979, 182.

[3] F. Barlow, *The Life of King Edward who rests at Westminster (Vita Eadwardi regis qui requiescit apud Westmonasterium)*, Oxford University Press, Oxford,1962, revised edition 1992, xxix- xxxiii; A. Gransden, *Historical Writing in England c.550 to c.1307*,Routledge and Kegan Paul,

London, 1974, 60; E. John, 'The Return of the Vikings' in *The Anglo-Saxons*, ed. J. Campbell et al., Phaidon Press, Oxford, 1982, 221.

[4] N.P. Brooks and H.E. Walker, 'The Authority and Interpretation of the Bayeux Tapestry'. in Gameson, 63-92.

[5] F. Wormald, in F. M. Stenton *et al.*, *The Bayeux Tapestry*, Phaidon Press, London, 1965, 32.

[6] Eg R. Brilliant, 'The Bayeux Tapestry: A Stripped Narrative for their Eyes and Ears', in Gameson, 111-138; C.R. Dodwell, 'The Bayeux Tapestry and the French Secular Epic', *Burlington Magazine* 108 (1966), 549-60; D. Bernstein, *The Mystery of the Bayeux Tapestry*, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, London, 1986, 104-107.

[7] Brooks and Walker in Gameson, 70-73; Barlow, *Vita Eadwardi*, xlvi.

[8] E. Kantorowicz, *The King's Two Bodies: A Study in Medieval Political Theology*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1957; R. Deshman, *'Benedictus Monarcha et Monachus*: Early Medieval Ruler Theology and the Anglo-Saxon Reform', *Frühmittelalterliche Studien* 22 (1988), 204-240; *'Christus Rex et Magi Reges:* Kingship and Christology in Ottonian and Anglo-Saxon Art', *Frühmittelalterliche Studien* 10 (1976), 367-405.

[9] Kantorowicz, *The King's Two Bodies*, 60.

[10] Kantorowicz, *The King's Two Bodies*, 46.

[11] Deshman, 'Benedictus Monarcha et Monachus', 204-240.

[12] J. Gerchow, 'Prayers for King Cnut: The Liturgical Commemoration of a Conqueror', in *England in the Eleventh Century: Proceedings of the 1990 Harlaxton Symposium,* ed. C. Hicks, Watkins, Stamford, 1992, 219-238, 223; Gerchow, *Die Gedenküberlieferung der Angelsachsen Mit einem Katalog der libri vitae und Necrologien*, Berlin, 1988, 166.

[13] Eg H. Cowdrey, 'Towards an Interpretation of the Bayeux Tapestry', in Gameson, 93-110, 96.

[14] M. Biddle, 'Excavations at Winchester 1965: fourth interim report', *The Antiquaries Journal* XLVI (II), 1966, 329-32.

[15]Gameson in Gameson, *Study of the Bayeux Tapestry*, 195-6.

[16] Bernstein, *The Mystery of the Bayeux Tapestry*, 121.

[17] Brooks and Walker in Gameson, *Study of the Bayeux Tapestry*, 80.

[18] V. Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London 1969, 95.

[19] P. Binski, *Medieval Death: Ritual and Representation*, British Museum Press, London, 1996, 147.

[20] C.Daniell, *Death and Burial in Medieval England*, Routledge, London, 1997, 188.

[21] D.C. Douglas and G. W. Greenaway, *English Historical Documents*, Volume II. 1042-1189, Eyre and Spottiswoode, London, 1953, 120-146.

[22] J. Marx ed., *Guillaume de Jumièges, Gesta Normannorum Ducum*, Société de l'Histoire de Normandie, Rouen and Paris, 1914.

[23] L. Thorpe, *The Bayeux Tapestry and the Norman Invasion*, Folio Society, London, 1973, 33-55.

[24] Brooks and Walker in Gameson, *Study of the Bayeux Tapestry*, 80.

[25] Bernstein, *Mystery of the Bayeux Tapestry*, 162-4.