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Rachel Hatch
Illinois Wesleyan University

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Contact: Rachel Hatch, (309) 556-3960

Professor Helps Shed New Light on Renowned Bayeux Tapestry

BLOOMINGTON, Ill. – The Bayeux Tapestry captured a pivotal moment in European history. The 230-foot-long embroidered cloth, which depicts events leading up to the Battle of Hastings in 1066 and scenes from the battle itself, is renowned among scholars of medieval history, art and literature. Illinois Wesleyan University Professor of English Dan Terkla is helping to uncover the mysteries of the Tapestry with the new book *The Bayeux Tapestry: New Interpretations* (Boydell & Brewer, 2009).

“History is written by the victors, and the Tapestry is a great piece of public relations,” said Terkla, who co-edited the collection of essays for the book, and contributed his own chapter. In the case of the Bayeux Tapestry, the victor was William of Normandy, who defeated King Harold I of England at the Battle of Hastings. Thought to be embroidered around 1068, the Tapestry tells the story of how William the Conqueror ascended to the throne of England as the rightful king, and portrays Harold as a usurper.

Edited by Terkla, Martin Foys and Karen Eileen Overbey, the book is a collection from a combination of well-established scholars and voices new to Tapestry studies, said Terkla. “We truly hope to live up to the title of the book, *New Interpretations*,” he said. “Not only does the book take a multi-disciplinary approach, with scholars from fields ranging from history to art to Anglo-Saxon studies contributing, but its particular mix of seasoned and young scholars can provide a new perspective.” Terkla’s chapter, titled “From Hastingus to Hastings and Beyond: Inexorable Inevitability on the Bayeux Tapestry,” situates the Norman invasion of 1066 in a context that reaches back to the first Viking ruler in Normandy, Hastingus, forward to William and the Norman invasion, and beyond to the broader history of Norman conquests. Setting the Tapestry in this broad context causes one to wonder, as Terkla does, “Did Hastingus’s presence in Normandy set into motion an inevitable link that runs all the way to William?” He argues that the Tapestry’s design creates a sense of historical inevitability through its use of line.

“You can look at the Tapestry and see the ways in which the ground and waterlines run, how gestures are configured,” said Terkla. “It all pulls the eyes from left to right. All of the

visual elements come together to imply the inevitability of this Norman conquest and future conquests.”

The idea for the book surfaced during a National Endowment for the Humanities Summer Seminar, directed by R. Howard Bloch at Yale, that Terkla attended in 2005. Inspired by the seminar, he co-organized sessions in 2006 for the International Medieval Congress at the University of Leeds, England, and then co-organized an international conference at the British Museum dedicated to the Tapestry in 2008.

“The Tapestry has captured the interest of scholars and leaders for centuries,” said Terkla, who noted that Napoleon and the Nazis studied it for tips on invading England. The Tapestry “invites viewers to see it as part of a continuum of history. I am hoping the book encourages readers to step back and discover something they have not realized about the Tapestry before.”

Terkla joined the faculty of Illinois Wesleyan in 1995, and teaches classes on medieval literature, art and culture; the humanities; and the Beat Generation. He received his doctorate in comparative literature from the University of Southern California in 1992. His research on the thirteenth-century Hereford world map has been published in *Imago Mundi: The International Journal for the History of Cartography*, *Geotema: Organo ufficiale dell'Associazione Geografi Italiani*, and elsewhere. He has co-edited another collection of Tapestry studies, *New Research on the Bayeux Tapestry*, to be published early in 2010.

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