

## France's Bayeux Tapestry faces first restoration in 150 years

- Bayeux (Calvados, France)
- 17 March 2021 14:22
- AFP (Chloé COUPEAU)

It has stood for over nine centuries as the most celebrated record of the 1066 Norman Conquest of England, its famous images cemented into the mind of every British school child.

But for all its enduring power, the 70-metre (230 feet) long Bayeux Tapestry -- held at a museum in the northern French town of the same name -- is a fragile object suffering from wear-and-tear, including thousands of holes.

It will now be restored for the first since 1870, two years after an agreement between Paris and London for the tapestry to be loaned to Britain.

"The tapestry is an old lady who is nearly 1,000 years old, a very, very fine linen canvas embroidered with wool which now shows multiple signs of damage," Antoine Verney, the chief curator of the museum, told AFP.

"Any handling of the work in its current state can lead to new alterations. This is the main reason for this intervention."

### - 10,000 holes -

The Bayeux Tapestry depicts the events leading up to the Norman Conquest, a pivotal event in English history that transformed the country's language, culture and administration.

Believed to have been made a few years after the conquest, it culminates with the defeat by William the Conqueror of Anglo-Saxon monarch Harold at the 1066 Battle of Hastings after the Norman ruler crossed the Channel with an invasion force.

Generations of schoolchildren in Britain have learned about the battle through the tapestry and its legendary image of Harold being shot in the eye with a Norman arrow.

In January 2020, eight textiles experts inspected the tapestry, listed as a "memory of the world" artefact by UNESCO, recording nearly 24,200 stains and 10,000 holes.

Repairs carried out over the centuries and "the exceptional dimensions of this work give the illusion of a good general state of conservation" but "the

structural state of the canvas and support of the embroidery is very fragile and worrying", they said in a report.

Whether it will ever make the journey across the Channel to be shown in England largely depends on the tapestry's state of preservation.

"It cannot travel until it is restored. But one question remains: Can it travel when it is restored," asked Verney.

For the deputy mayor of Bayeux in charge of tourism, Loic Jamin, after its restoration, it will not be allowed to leave.

"The only justification for possibly moving it is to restore it," he said.

## **WHO experts say countries should keep using AstraZeneca jab**

- Geneva (Switzerland)
- 17 March 2021 17:54
- AFP (Robin Millard, with AFP bureaus)

World Health Organization experts on Wednesday recommended countries continue to use the AstraZeneca vaccine, but said they were looking into the jab's safety after a slew of countries suspended its use over health fears.

The WHO, Europe's medicines regulator and AstraZeneca itself have repeatedly said the vaccine was safe after several countries reported feared links with blood clots or brain haemorrhages.

The suspensions have marred the global vaccine drive aimed at ending a year-long pandemic that has already killed more than 2.6 million people around the world since it first emerged in China in late 2019.

But the WHO's vaccine experts said Wednesday it was still better to take the AstraZeneca vaccine than not -- adding that it was looking into available data on the jab.

"The WHO Global Advisory Committee on Vaccine Safety is carefully assessing the latest available safety data," the UN health agency said in a statement.

"At this time, WHO considers that the benefits of the AstraZeneca vaccine outweigh its risks and recommends that vaccinations continue."

The recommendation echoed a similar statement from the European Medicines Agency on Tuesday advising countries to continue using the vaccine, saying there was no link with clots.

The Amsterdam-based agency said in a statement it is holding an extraordinary meeting Thursday to finalise its conclusions on the blood clot issue and "make any necessary recommendations for further action".

Several countries from France to Venezuela to Indonesia said they would not use the vaccine after several reports emerged of blood clots and brain haemorrhages in people who had received the vaccine.

The British-Swedish jab has been dogged by controversy from early on in its rollout, after some countries initially recommended it for people over the age of 65 and then backpedalled, saying there was insufficient data for people in the age group that had received the shot.

## **Teenage girl caught in Myanmar protest crossfire fights for life**

- Yangon (Yangon division, Myanmar)
- 17 March 2021 16:28
- AFP

A 16-year-old girl's life hung in the balance on Wednesday, after she was caught in the crossfire of a crackdown on Myanmar protests, and her parents risked arrest in a frantic bid to get her to hospital.

The country has been in uproar since the military ousted civilian leader Aung San Suu Kyi in a February 1 coup, triggering a mass uprising that has brought hundreds of thousands to the streets demanding a return to democracy.

But as authorities increasingly turn to lethal means to quash dissent, more and more civilians and bystanders are dying from bullet wounds.

The latest casualty was a girl known by the pseudonym Ngwe Oo, in Wundwin, a remote town in central Mandalay region, who was on her way to the market when a rubber bullet felled her on Tuesday.

"She was going to buy vegetables, but then the security force shot her from a distance," a doctor told AFP Wednesday.

"She was not even in the protest."

### **- Medical services curtailed -**

Arriving at the military hospital at 11 pm, the 16-year-old promptly underwent a CT scan, which showed broken parts of the skull had lodged into her brain on the right side.

"She will die if there's no operation, but even with it, there's only a 50 percent survival chance," La Min said.

Twenty-four hours after arriving at the hospital, Ngwe Oo's fate was still unclear, with doctors telling the family she had lost a lot of blood after the operation.

"I am incredibly sad and worried for her," her mother told AFP, crying and unable to say more.

## **Real Madrid's old guard see off Atalanta to reach Champions League last eight**

- Madrid (Spain)
- 16 March 2021 23:52
- AFP (Thomas ALLNUTT)

Real Madrid avoided another early Champions League exit on Tuesday by beating Atalanta 3-1 to win the tie 4-1 on aggregate and reach the quarter-finals for the first time in three years.

Sergio Ramos marked his return from injury by converting a penalty after Karim Benzema continued his scoring streak by capitalising on a glaring error from Atlanta goalkeeper Marco Sportiello.

Sportiello's scuffed clearance in the first half resulted in Benzema being given an easy finish at the Alfredo di Stefano stadium and after an electric start, Atalanta never really recovered.

Luis Muriel pulled one back for the visitors late on but any hopes of a comeback were quickly dashed as substitute Marco Asensio fired in a third for Madrid.

Zinedine Zidane's side will be in Friday's draw for the last eight and with their old guard fit and firing again, they will be hopeful of exceeding what are now dampened expectations of La Liga's reigning champions.

"We showed tonight how much hunger there still is in this team," said Luka Modric. "We can go far. How far let's see but today was an important step."

Ramos played just over an hour in his second appearance since recovering from a knee injury while Benzema's goal was his eighth in as many games and 70th in the Champions League, making him only the fifth player to reach that number.

The 35-year-old Modric and Toni Kroos were dominant in the absence of the suspended Casemiro.

"I feel 27!" joked Modric. "The years on your passport don't matter, it's about what you do on the pitch."

How Madrid's veterans would fare against more polished opposition remains to be seen, after they came up short against Manchester City last year and Ajax the year before that, both in the last 16.

## **How 'sailing's All Blacks' forged an America's Cup dynasty**

- Auckland (New Zealand)
- 17 March 2021 06:42
- AFP (Neil SANDS)

Team New Zealand's 7-3 America's Cup victory over Luna Rossa in Auckland on Wednesday confirmed the Kiwi syndicate as the dominant force in the regatta's modern era -- earning them comparisons with rugby union's fabled All Blacks.

From humble beginnings in the mid-1980s, the New Zealanders have outshone better-resourced teams to contest seven of the past eight America's Cup finals, winning four of them.

The latest triumph over Italy's Luna Rossa showcased the innovation and consistency that have been the hallmarks of a team, which rival sailor Jimmy Spithill describes as the best in the world.

"To be able to race Team New Zealand on (their) home waters, it's a lot like a rugby player getting to go on the rugby field against the All Blacks at Eden Park in a Rugby World Cup final," the Luna Rossa co-helmsman said in the match lead-up.

## Spain legalises euthanasia, assisted suicide

- Madrid (Spain)
- 18 March 2021 10:51
- AFP (Diego URDANETA)

Spain's parliament gave final approval to a law legalising euthanasia Thursday, becoming one of the few nations to allow terminally-ill or gravely-injured patients to end their own suffering.

A priority for Socialist Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez's government, the law was drafted following public pressure generated by several high-profile cases. The most famous is that of Ramon Sampedro whose plight was immortalised in the Oscar-winning 2004 film "The Sea Inside".

The move sees Spain become the fourth country in Europe to decriminalise assisted suicide, alongside the Netherlands, Belgium and Luxembourg.

Although Portugal's parliament passed a similar law in January, it was blocked this week by the Constitutional Court.

Government spokeswoman Maria Jesus Montero said there had been "great consensus" in parliament over the law which "responds to an end-of-life situation involving pain and suffering that no-one wants to face".

"It's a law.. which has the potential to offer people a better end-of-life than before," she told Cadena Ser radio.

The Spanish legislation will permit euthanasia in which medical staff intentionally end a life to relieve suffering, and assisted suicide in which it is the patient who carries out the procedure.

### - Strict conditions -

Backed by leftwing and centrist parties, the legislation will allow anyone with a "serious or incurable illness" or a condition which is "chronic or incapacitating" to request help dying, thereby avoiding "intolerable suffering".

But it imposes strict criteria: the patient -- a Spanish national or a legal resident -- must be "fully aware and conscious" when they make the request, which must be submitted twice in writing, 15 days apart.

The request can be rejected if it is believed the requirements have not been met; it must be approved by a second medic and by an evaluation body.

Any healthcare professional could withdraw on grounds of "conscience" from taking part in the procedure that would be available through Spain's national health service.

The move has been hailed by patients and right-to-die campaigners.

"It doesn't make any sense that people... would choose to live an undignified life," said Sofia Malagon, 60, who has Parkinson's and worries what will happen if she gets dementia.

"I don't want to be left like a vegetable," she told AFP.

### **- 'Form of murder' -**

But the move has been roundly rejected by the Catholic Church and Spain's rightwing parties, with its promulgation also raising questions among some medical professionals.

Euthanasia "is always a form of murder since it involves one man causing the death of another," said the Episcopal Conference, which groups Spain's leading bishops and has accused the government of going from "defending life to being responsible for causing death".

## **Scientists unearth meteorite from the birth of the solar system**

- Paris (France)
- 16 March 2021 14:33
- AFP (Pierre CELERIER)

Scientists believe they have identified a meteorite formed in the first million years of our solar system, making it the oldest known meteor of volcanic origin. The space rock, which began its journey some 4.5 billion years ago, has already proved an "exceptional" witness to the building blocks of the planets.

Known as Erg Chech 002, the meteorite was discovered in May 2020 by meteor hunters in the Algerian Sahara desert. It had rested undisturbed for "at least 100 years", according to Jean-Alix Barrat, a geochemist at France's Brest University.

In a recent study published in the Proceedings of National Academy of Sciences journal, Barrat and his colleagues describe its discovery and several rare features.

There are 43 officially documented fragments, but "probably about a hundred" either still in the ground or unaccounted for, said the study. The largest ones are "as big as a fist," Barrat told AFP.

With its greenish exterior and brownish interior, Erg Chech 002 might not appear extraordinary at first glance. But it is, in fact, extremely rare.

Of the roughly 65,000 meteorites so far documented on Earth, only around 4,000 contain what is known as "differentiated matter". This means they came from celestial bodies large enough to have experienced tectonic activity.

Of those 4,000, 95 percent come from just two asteroids. But Erg Chech 002 is among the remaining five percent.

"It's the only one out of 65,000 meteorites that is like it is," said Barrat.

"Such rocks were quite common at the very beginning of the history of the solar system."

There are two possible explanations for Erg Chech 002's rarity.

The type of protoplanet from which it originated provided raw material "for the growth of terrestrial planets" such as Earth, said Barrat.

Others were pulverised in the great cosmic billiard game of the formation of the solar system.

## **Mars' 'missing' water is buried beneath surface: study**

- Washington (District of Columbia, United States)
- 17 March 2021 01:40
- AFP (Lucie Aubourg and Issam Ahmed)

Billions of years ago, Mars was home to lakes and oceans -- but where all the water went to transform the planet into the desolate rock we know today has been something of a mystery.

Most of it was thought to have been lost to space, but a new study funded by NASA proposes that it didn't go anywhere but is trapped within minerals in the crust.

"We're saying that the crust forms what we call hydrated minerals, so minerals that actually have water in their crystal structure," Eva Scheller, lead author of the new paper in Science, told AFP.

In fact, Scheller's model suggests anywhere between 30 - 99 percent of the initial water remains trapped inside these minerals.

Early Mars was thought to have enough water to cover the whole planet in roughly 100 to 1,500 meters (330 to 4,920 feet) of ocean.



Because the planet lost its magnetic field early in its history, its atmosphere was progressively stripped away, and it was assumed this was how it lost its water.

But the authors of the new study believe that while some of the water did disappear, the majority remained.

Using observations made by Mars rovers as well as of meteorites from the planet, the team focused on hydrogen, a key component of water.

### **- Permanent loss -**

The study's authors instead say there was a combination of two mechanisms: the trapping of water in minerals in the planet's crust as well as the loss of water to the atmosphere.

"Anytime that you have a rock and it's interacting with water, there's a series of very complex reactions that form a hydrated mineral," said Scheller.

According to the teams' simulations, the planet lost between most of its water between four to 3.7 billion years ago, which means "Mars was pretty much like we see how it is today for the past three billion years," said Scheller.

She added she was excited about what the Perseverance rover, which landed last month for a multiyear science mission on the planet, might be able to contribute to the area of research.

"The Perseverance rover is actually going to investigate exactly these processes and reactions that cause the sequestration of water in the crust," she said.