



Sacred Threads: The Bayeux Tapestry as a Religious Object¹

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There is a duality to the Bayeux Tapestry. The first half is seemingly sympathetic towards Harold Godwin (c.1022-1066), with the second part strikingly pro-Norman. There is a double narrative, one running through the frieze itself and another among the animals and creatures in the borders. We see clerics and knights, churches and palaces, with the sacred blending in with the secular. The interpretation of the Tapestry's narrative has leaned heavily towards the secular nature of the narrative. With its vivid depiction of aristocratic life, of hunting and war, it has been argued that the Tapestry was originally meant to hang along the wall of a castle or a manor house, its embroidered tale of war and conquest depicting in wool and linen the songs and stories of knightly deeds.² Attractive and ingenious as some of theories suggesting a secular venue for the Tapestry are, no evidence exists to prove or substantiate any of them. If an embroidery as long and as costly as the Bayeux Tapestry had been displayed as a background to feasting and storytelling in one of the great halls of England, then surely one of the monastic chroniclers would have heard about it and made reference to it. To display a

¹ This study of the Tapestry is a product of a National Endowment for the Humanities Seminar held at Yale in the summer of 2005 under the direction of R. Howard Bloch, who has recently published *A Needle in the Right Hand of God: The Norman Conquest of 1066 and the Making and Meaning of the Bayeux Tapestry* (New York: Random House, 2006).

² Richard Brilliant, "The Bayeux Tapestry: a stripped narrative for their eyes and ears," *Word and Image* 7 (1991): 99-127. Gale Owen-Crocker, "Brothers Rivals, and the Geometry of the Bayeux Tapestry" and Chris Henige, "Putting the Bayeux Tapestry in its Place," in *King Harold II and the Bayeux Tapestry*, ed. Gale R. Owen-Crocker, (Woodbridge: Boydell, 2005), 109-123 and 125-137, respectively.

“monument to a Norman triumph” in an English hall would surely have aroused comment, and the monastic chroniclers adept at collecting gossip would surely have made mention of it.

True to its dualistic nature, the Bayeux Tapestry has had two lives: one religious, the other secular. From what little evidence is available we can see that the Tapestry was made for a clerical patron who had sufficient resources to commission such lengthy embroidery. As for the Tapestry itself, it was most likely embroidered by nuns sewing in a monastic workshop. The Tapestry is worked on linen, a fabric long associated with the clergy. Also, only monastic houses would have had enough sheep to produce the huge quantities of wool required for the embroidery. Many of the designs and images in the Tapestry derive from sacred texts and manuscripts that may well have been found in the libraries of the monasteries of St. Augustine’s and Christ Church, Canterbury. Mingling with images that derive from Anglo-Saxon England and Scandinavia are those that show the influence of that most hieratic of societies, Byzantium. The Bayeux Tapestry has always been associated with clerical buildings, first the Cathedral and now the museum, a former seminary. It can be said that the “secular” phase of the Tapestry began with its near-demise during the French Revolution and the use made of it by Napoleon, English and French nationalists of the nineteenth-century, and then the Nazi occupying power.

From the Enlightenment onwards a secular interpretation of the past has become almost the standard view. The opposite was the case during the medieval period: religion was at the essence of life, and it was also the prism through which lives and events were judged. Even the decorative elements in the Tapestry, such as the animals for example, had a moral purpose to them. History, art, literature: they were written or produced with a religious theme or moral behind them. Works such as the Tapestry should be seen within this moral, religious, context: it

was part of the fabric of the culture of the day. If we look at the Tapestry as embroidery as having sacred as well as secular threads, then we surely gain a clearer understanding of its purpose. And that purpose was religious, moral one: the wages of oath breaking and disloyalty was death and damnation. The Conquest was cast by the Normans in terms of a religious crusade, not a brutal land-grab; otherwise, the Pope would not have given his sanction for one Christian nation to devour another.

The Bayeux Tapestry first became known to history in 1476 in an inventory made of the treasures of the Cathedral of Notre-Dame of Bayeux. We learn that the Tapestry was hung around the nave of the church of the Feast of Relics (July 1) and was displayed during the Octave, the eight days, of the Feast. Created as it was of linen and wool, the Tapestry must have seemed quite plain alongside the jeweled riches of the Cathedral treasury.³ Today, the Tapestry is housed in a museum that, as we mentioned, was once a seminary, complete with a Norman chapel.⁴ In all likelihood the Tapestry was designed and embroidered in monastic houses. A case has been made for the Tapestry having been made in a French monastic house,⁵ although the general consensus is that it was associated with St. Augustine's or Christ Church, Canterbury. Only a wealthy monastic house, with considerable financial and artistic resources at its disposal, or a great magnate, whether secular or clerical, would have had the ability to finance an enterprise as large as the Tapestry, which though quite narrow is of extraordinary length, the equivalent of an Olympic swimming pool.

³ Carola Hicks, *The Bayeux Tapestry: The Life Story of a Masterpiece* (London: Chatto & Windus, 2006), 63.

⁴ For a history of the museum building, see www.tapisserie-bayeux.fr.

⁵ George Beech, *Was the Bayeux Tapestry made in France? The Case for Saint-Florent of the Saumur* (New York: Palgrave, 2005).

There are two likely candidates that could be the patron, or indeed patroness, of the Tapestry, both to be found depicted in the Tapestry itself, and both of them had clerical and secular roles in society. Carola Hicks has made the suggestion that the Tapestry had a patroness, Queen Edith (c.1020/30-1075). Edith (**Figure 1**)⁶ is shown at the foot of her husband, at Edward's deathbed, warming his feet, weeping, covering her face, and pointing in her brother



Figure 1: *Queen Edith. Detail from the Bayeux Tapestry – 11th Century by special permission of the City of Bayeux.*

Harold's direction. A pawn in her father's political schemes, Edith, Harold's sister, was forced to marry King Edward, and the loveless marriage produced no heirs. It was this fact that lay at the heart of so many of the problems of 1066. Edith herself was a shrewd and astute woman, and a survivor, almost as clever, it was said, "as a man." She commissioned a book to be written about her husband, where the deathbed scene depicted in the Tapestry is described in detail.⁷ In

⁶ Carola Hicks, *Life Story*, 22-39. For a more complete historical background, see Pauline Stafford, *Queen Emma and Queen Edith: Queenship and Women's Power in the Eleventh Century* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997).

⁷ See Jennifer Brown's essay in this issue.

the book Edith made a virtue of her childlessness, portraying Edward as being a holy celibate, worthy of being canonized.⁸ She was an accomplished linguist, and she was also famous for her skill at embroidery. Edith ran a workshop staffed with nuns that produced textiles for churches as well as decorating fine robes for her husband. English aristocratic ladies were known for their skill with the needle, embroidering altar-cloths and decorated textiles for both sacred and secular purposes. Edith was the patroness of several nunneries, such as Wilton, where noble ladies embroidered cloths of varying kinds.⁹ Knowing the major players in the power struggle of 1066, Edith could have provided first-hand, indeed “insider” knowledge of events, information that might have been used in the Tapestry. It may well be because of Queen Edith’s influence that her brother Harold is presented in such a favorable light at the early portions of the Tapestry. After the Conquest, Edith adroitly made her peace with the new regime and retired to a convent while at the same time managing to retain most of her lands and properties.

However, it has long been the contention that William the Conqueror’s (1028-1087) half-brother, Odo (d. 1097), Bishop of Bayeux, may have been the patron. **(Figure 2)** Odo is shown

⁸ Frank Barlow, *The Life of Edward the Confessor Who Rests at Westminster* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992).

⁹ Carola Hicks, *Life Story*, 22-39.



***Figure 2:** Bishop Odo. Detail from the Bayeux Tapestry – 11th Century
by special permission of the City of Bayeux.*

seated on a lion throne, a head higher than his half-brother William seemingly ordering the construction of the fleet to begin. **(Figure 3)** Odo may have commissioned the Tapestry



***Figure 3:** Odo Orders the Fleet. Detail from the Bayeux Tapestry – 11th Century
by special permission of the City of Bayeux.*

in time for the consecration of the new Cathedral at Bayeux in the 1080s. He, like Edith, exemplifies the dual nature of the Tapestry. Odo was a cleric, a bishop, and a warrior. Indeed, it

is Odo rather than William who seemingly dominates events. He is seen again attending a council of war attended by his other half-brother, Robert of Mortain.¹⁰ **(Figure 4)** During the

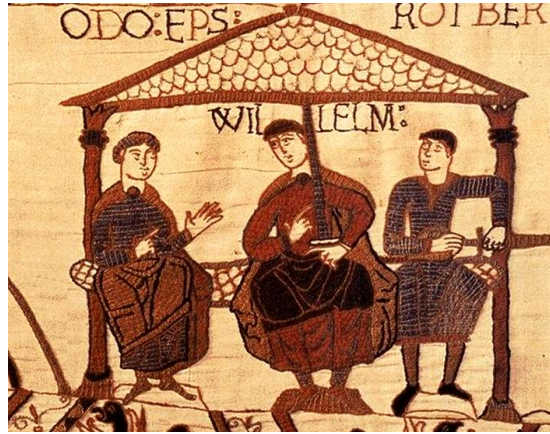


Figure 4: *Council of War. Detail from the Bayeux Tapestry – 11th Century by special permission of the City of Bayeux.*

actual battle of Hastings, Odo is seen at a pivotal moment, wielding a mace and rallying the young troops. **(Figure 5)** Several of Odo's tenants appear in the Tapestry, men who



Figure 5: *Odo Rallies the Troops. Detail from the Bayeux Tapestry – 11th Century by special permission of the City of Bayeux.*

¹⁰ Considered by contemporaries as being “too dim” as a leader, Robert of Mortain, unlike Odo, proved to be loyal to William the Conqueror.

might well have been known to the congregation in the nave of Bayeux Cathedral. Names of figures such as Turolf and Ælfgýva, whose identities are lost to us, may have been familiar to the first viewers of the Tapestry.

There are signs that the Tapestry was finished in some haste: while the figures and animals in the center frieze are filled in, some of the images in the border, particularly towards the latter part, have been left in outline only. Odo was certainly wealthy enough to commission the Tapestry. He was second only to William in rank and wealth, taking over most of Harold's extensive lands and properties. Then, added to this came plunder from the North, especially the abbey at Durham, which all told made Odo one of the richest men in English history.¹¹ The image of Odo that is portrayed in the Tapestry is quite different from the Odo of historical reality.¹² Ruthless and ambitious, Odo antagonized the monks of St. Augustine's Canterbury, may have had aspirations to the papacy itself, and rebelled against his half-brother William. Venal, treacherous and corrupt, Odo was lucky to be released from prison on William's death. Odo joined the First Crusade only to die at Palermo, Sicily. Like Harold, Bishop Odo was an avid collector of relics, some of which may have been used in the dramatic scene where Harold swore to uphold William's candidacy for the throne of England.

Placing a tapestry, or embroidery, that celebrated military valor in a sacred space was not uncommon and would not seem at all out of place. We know of an embroidered narrative that was commissioned, or even sewn, by Ælfflaed, widow of Earl Byrhtnoth who was killed by the Danes in 991. The hanging, which depicted Byhtnoth's heroic deeds and campaigns, was

¹¹ Andrew Bridgeford, *The Hidden History of the Bayeux Tapestry* (New York: Walker & Company, 2005), 209.

¹² David Bates, "The Character and Career of Odo of Bayeux," *Speculum* 50.1 (1975): 1-29; "Odo," *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (2004-2005).

presented to the monastery at Ely.¹³ Among the unique features of the Bayeux Tapestry is that it is the only one to have survived, where other, more lavishly decorated with gold thread and jewels, have perished or been looted for their intrinsic treasures. While seemingly humble, the linen upon which the panels were embroidered was actually a luxurious and costly commodity. That the Tapestry was not embroidered with gold thread or covered with jewels might have actually saved it from being plundered for its valuable decorations.

Linen was also, from the era of the Egyptians, a cloth associated with the priestly rank. During Christian times it came to denote purity, and was used to make sacerdotal robes.¹⁴ So we can see how the Tapestry had a clerical background: its patron, or patroness, was a religious; it was embroidered on a cloth that had religious status, and it was embroidered by clerical fingers of aristocratic nuns. While the Tapestry celebrates military glory, its display within a Cathedral would not have been out of place or regarded as being overly secular in nature. As we shall see, some of the decorations and images, both sacred and secular, that are found in the Tapestry may also be found in the decoration of churches of the time.

Religious imagery is blended seamlessly with the secular at the opening scene of the Tapestry. King Edward the Confessor (c. 1003-1066) is depicted in a chamber of his palace dispatching Harold on the fateful mission, one that is not recorded in the English sources. Edward is depicted here in the manner of a bearded Old Testament king. **(Figure 6)** The king's hand and fingers are stretched out towards Harold in a manner that is suggestive of Michelangelo's Creation Scene in the Sistine Chapel.

¹³ Carola Hicks, *Life Story*, 39.

¹⁴ Carola Hicks, *Life Story*, 40.



Figure 6: *Edward Dispatches Harold. Detail from the Bayeux Tapestry – 11th Century by special permission of the City of Bayeux.*

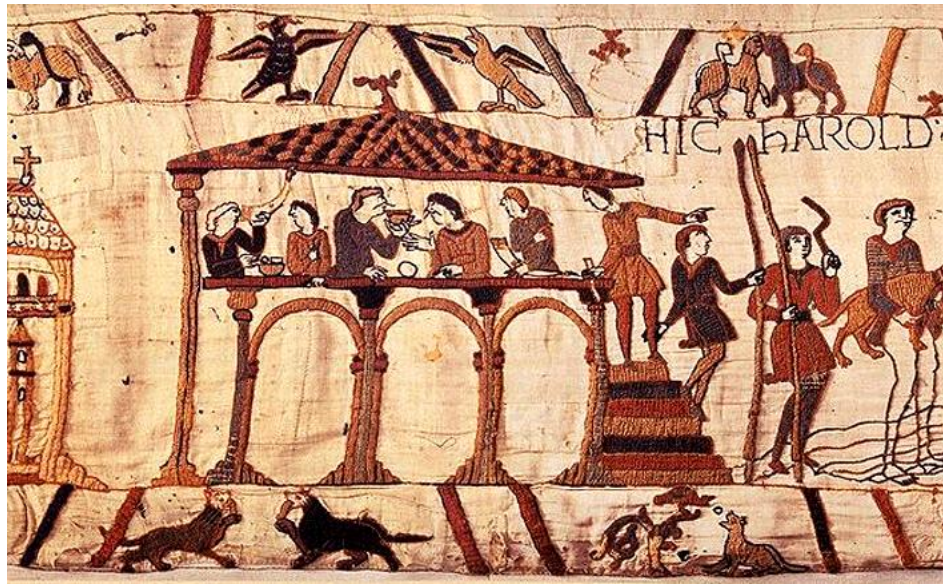
Soon after receiving his dispatch from King Edward, Harold is seen journeying, along with hawk and hounds, to the coast, to the manor and church of Bosham in Sussex. Harold, being a pious man, is seen genuflecting before he enters the church. **(Figure 7)** In appearance the church seems to be in the form of a reliquary.¹⁵

¹⁵ Bosham church is the oldest Christian site in Sussex, reputedly built on the remains of a Roman basilica. Most of the present day church dates from the reign of King Canute. The church is only a short distance away from the water, as can be seen in the Tapestry when Harold leaves the manor and embarks on his fateful journey.



***Figure 7:** Harold enters Bosham Church. Detail from the Bayeux Tapestry – 11th Century by special permission of the City of Bayeux.*

Harold is then seen feasting with his companions at the manor, in a scene that has echoes of the Upper Room of Christ's Last Supper. **(Figure 8)** Below the revelers we see a pair of wolves, licking their paws, possibly a sign to a Norman audience that Harold was devious, a man not to be trusted.



*Figure 8: Harold Feasts. Detail from the Bayeux Tapestry – 11th Century
by special permission of the City of Bayeux.*

While on campaign in Brittany with William, Duke of Normandy, Harold rescues a soldier from the treacherous sands along the ford of the River Couesnon. In the distance background stands the Abbey of Mont-Saint-Michel, a building perched on a hilltop and already a major center for pilgrimage. The Tapestry designer gives a stylized impression of what the Romanesque church looked like.¹⁶ Already famous as a center of pilgrimage, Mont-Sainte-Michelle is also depicted in the form of reliquary, nestled on a hilltop. **(Figure 9).**

¹⁶ Lucien Musset, *The Bayeux Tapestry* (Woodbridge: Boydell, 2005), 130.

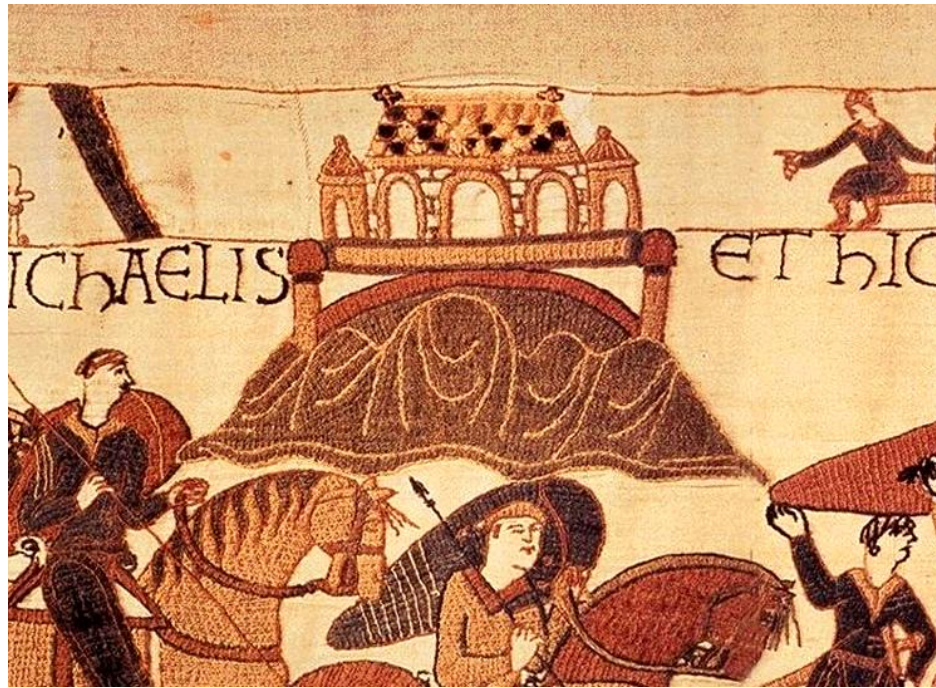


Figure 9: *Mont Saint-Michel. Detail from the Bayeux Tapestry – 11th Century by special permission of the City of Bayeux.*

The largest, and most important, ecclesiastical structure, King Edward's foundation of Westminster Abbey, is depicted as it nears completion. A workman hastily races to attach a golden cock, a reference to St. Peter, as a weathervane. The hand of God appears in the heavens to bless the new church. **(Figure 10)** King Edward's abbey was consecrated on December 28th, 1065.¹⁷ The King died, probably as the result of a stroke, on the night of January 4th or 5th, 1066, and Harold was crowned, with seeming indecent haste on January 6th. It was news of Harold's coronation that provoked William of Normandy to plan his invasion and ultimate Conquest. If indeed Edward the Confessor had planned to secure the throne for his Norman relative, then his

¹⁷ Lucien Musset, *The Bayeux Tapestry*, 160-164. The Abbey was the first major Romanesque church built in England, and there are similarities in its design with the Abbey of Jumièges which was dedicated in 1067. Robert of Jumièges was a friend of King Edward's, and served as Archbishop of Canterbury until he was removed by the Godwins to be replaced by the controversial Stigand.

wish was made manifest. William was to be crowned in the Abbey on Christmas Day, 1066, a feast day that was reserved by the Byzantine Emperors for their own coronations. After a sequence of scenes depicting the events of January 1066 the theme of the Tapestry becomes much less religious and distinctly much more martial in its tone.



Figure 10: Westminster Abbey. Detail from the Bayeux Tapestry – 11th Century by special permission of the City of Bayeux.

Those who viewed the Tapestry as it was displayed in the nave of the Cathedral would have been able to identify many religious designs and motifs. Looking up from the Tapestry, worshippers would have seen many of the motifs either carved in stone or painted on the walls. The chevron pattern which divides the borders (**Figure 11**) can be seen, for example, in a censer cover from Canterbury,¹⁸ and also the designs on the massive piers from Durham Cathedral.¹⁹ (**Figure 12**)

¹⁸ For a photograph of the image see, David M. Wilson, *The Bayeux Tapestry* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1985), 210.



Figure 11: *Chevron Pattern in the Border. Detail from the Bayeux Tapestry – 11th Century by special permission of the City of Bayeux.*



Figure 12: *Durham Cathedral.*

¹⁹ Durham is the site of St. Cuthbert's tomb which contained ecclesiastical robes, such as the stole, whose workmanship is a supreme example of English embroidery. Today, the tradition of needlework is being carried on by a group known as the Durham Cathedral Broderers. Photo courtesy of *Peregrinations* Photo Bank.

Animals, domestic and fantastical, were a common element in Anglo-Saxon and Romanesque art and their presence in the Tapestry is therefore unsurprising.

There is, however, one scene in the Tapestry that would seem completely out of place within a sacred building. And that is the mysterious scene involving a rare figure in the Tapestry: a female with a name. This is Ælfgyva, a heavily robed figure whose face is apparently being stroked by a man, who from his tonsure, appears to be a cleric of some kind.

(Figure 13) Was she a nun? All four of the women depicted in the Tapestry are shown heavily veiled. The designer may have borrowed a Byzantine convention where ladies of high rank wore veils in public to protect them from the gaze of the masses. Below them is a well-endowed male nude figure.

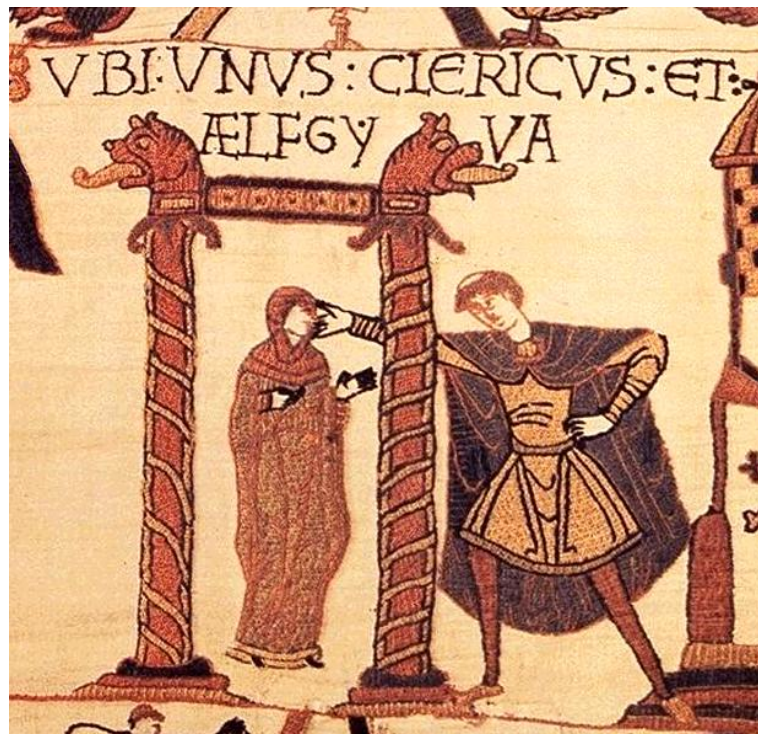


Figure 13: *Ælfgyva and a Cleric. Detail from the Bayeux Tapestry – 11th Century by special permission of the City of Bayeux.*

Controversy has raged over who the lady might be and what the scene represents. The naked man, or “megaphallic” figure, is also interesting because carvings, almost identical to this one, have been found both in Northern France and in Ireland.²⁰ There is another nude male figure in the border in the scene just before this one. This one seems to be busy chopping wood. Naked couples may be found in the upper border where the narrative depicts the Norman cavalry preparing to move forward into battle at Hastings. It is possible that the pair of nude figures depict Adam and Eve. **(Figure 14)**



Figure 14: *Adam and Eve?*



Figure 15: *Female Centaur*

We can also see a pair of lusty female centaurs with the heads and hair of mermaids. **(Figure 15)** A similar mermaid-centaur may be found carved over the west door of the church of St. Botolph, at Stow Longa in Huntingdonshire.

In all likelihood the designer of the Tapestry was either a clerical figure or had close contacts with a cloister and monastic scriptorium. He would have been conversant with

²⁰ Karen Rose Matthews, “Nudity in the Margins: The Bayeux Tapestry and its Relationship to Marginal Architectural Sculpture,” in *Naked Before God: Uncovering the Body in Anglo-Saxon England*, eds. Benjamin C. Withers and Jonathan Wilcox (Charleston: West Virginia University Press, 2003), 138-161. In the Reading Bayeux Tapestry, created in the late 19th century, the naked figures were given underwear. See <http://www.bayeuxtapestry.org.uk/>

decorative styles both in architecture and in manuscript illumination, drawing his inspiration from both. One of the most profound influences on the artistic world from 1000 to 1300 was Byzantium, with its hieratic forms and austere, boneless figures. Added to this inspiration, transmuted in the form of precious silks and fabrics, was a Northern flair for decorative arts incorporating the wonders of nature and the giddy excess of fantastical animals and shapes. This Eastern influence was seen as long ago as the 1950s and reinterpreted once more in R. Howard Bloch's recent study of the Tapestry.²¹

Ecclesiastical decoration, both in illuminated manuscripts and in decorative sculpture, also provided models for the military figures to be found in the Tapestry. Musset, in his introductory chapter, provides an illustration of an early eleventh-century frieze from Winchester which shows a sword and chain mail that is very similar to that depicted in the Tapestry.²² Some of the finest examples of carvings of knights in chain mail may be found at the Church of Notre-Dame-Du-Port at Clermont-Ferrand, dating from around 1150. Line drawings of knights in armor similar to those depicted in the Tapestry may also be seen in manuscripts such as the Old English Hexateuch and scenes from "The Massacre of the Innocents."²³ There are also some fine carvings of knights to be found at the cathedral and cloister of Monreale, Sicily. The roots of such secular, military, depictions derive, in no small part, from religious sources, which include both manuscripts and sculpture.

²¹ Allan Glynn-Jones, *Portrait Painters: European Portraits to the End of the Nineteenth Century and English Twentieth-Century Portraits* (London: Phoenix House, 1950); R. Howard Bloch, *A Needle*.

²² For a photograph of the image, see Lucien Musset, *The Bayeux Tapestry*, chap. 3, fig. 6.

²³ BL MS Cotton Claudius B IV, fol. 24v; BL MS Cotton Nero C 4 f.14, and BL Add MS 14789 f.10. For a detailed description of the Norman military, see Christopher Gravett, *The Norman Knight AD 950-1204* (New York: Osprey Books, 1993).

Among the glories of early medieval art are illuminated manuscripts, the psalters and testaments, where vivid line drawings and colored illustrations give life to the text. The designer of the Tapestry must have access to several of such works, part of the “Winchester School” of manuscript illumination, a tradition that was carried on the cloisters of Christ Church and Saint Augustine’s, Canterbury. This artistic tradition of illuminated sacred texts influenced the work of the designer. One important manuscript was the Utrecht Psalter, made in Rheims c. 820-835, with its lively line drawings, and brought to Christ Church, Canterbury in the year 1000.²⁴ Some of the other important manuscripts include the Old English Hexateuch which was made at St. Augustine’s Abbey, Canterbury around 1030-1050. Images, such as that of the “hand of God” above Westminster Abbey, along with birds and other creatures, also derive from manuscript sources.²⁵

Animals almost outnumber the humans in the Tapestry, whether in the main narrative or more especially in the upper and lower borders.²⁶ The presence of animals served two major purposes. They are, of course, decorative. But animals were also endowed with allegorical and moral traits: their presence was to teach a lesson, a moral, to the observer. Once again, illuminated manuscripts provided an important source of inspiration for the designer. Exotic, winged creatures such as the Samnurv and the winged lion have their origins in Persia. The placement of paired birds and creatures is copied from the woven silk fabrics from Persia and

²⁴ Utrecht UB Cat. MS 32. Two digital copies of this manuscript are available: one from the Vitrine Library, <http://psalter.library.uu.nl> and also www.library.arizona.edu.

²⁵ Elzbieta Temple, *Anglo-Saxon Manuscripts* (London: Harvey Millar, 1976). Another important source for exotic animal designs appears to be the so-called “Marvels of the East,” BL Cotton Vitellius A. XV.

²⁶ Carola Hicks, *Animals in Early Medieval Art* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1993); “The Borders of the Bayeux Tapestry,” in *England in the Eleventh Century: Proceedings of the 1990 Harlaxton Symposium* (Stamford: Paul Watkins, 1992).

Byzantium. There are also barnyard animals to be found in the Tapestry, creatures associated with the hunt, and of course the thundering steeds of the Norman cavalry. Decorative as all these birds and animals might seem, they were placed in the Tapestry for another reason – to demonstrate a moral. The eleventh century saw the beginnings of the bestiaries, those encyclopedias of animal knowledge, replete with improving morals along with often dubious information.²⁷ Mythical creatures such as the dragon and the wyvern, along with lions and other beasts, entered the emerging world of chivalry.

Some of the symbols to be found in the Tapestry have their roots in the classical world. The phallus, for example, was seen a sign of good fortune. The centaur, and the Tapestry is unusual in having male and female centaurs, was a hybrid creature, part horse and part man. So too the centaur has a double nature, representing reason and also passion, vengeance and also heresy. A pair of peacocks sit together perched above Duke William's palace. **(Figure 16)**



Figure 16: *Peacocks. Detail from the Bayeux Tapestry – 11th Century
by special permission of the City of Bayeux.*

These birds evoke an image of luxury, but they also have an allegorical meaning to them. They are depicted on Roman sarcophagi as representing eternal life, their flesh being imperishable.

²⁷ Jenneta Rebold Benton, *The Medieval Menagerie: Animals in the Art of the Middle Ages* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1992).

They also represent vanity and jealousy. Another exotic, if less glamorous, Eastern creature is the camel. **(Figure 17)** The camel is a symbol of endurance and prudence, conserving its food so it can travel for days. Because it could kneel, the camel was also a symbol of humility. Somehow, in the medieval imagination the camel also represented lust.



Figure 17: Camel. Detail from the Bayeux Tapestry – 11th Century
by special permission of the City of Bayeux.

There are many lions depicted in the Tapestry, some with tails curling over their hind quarters while others have wings. Lions were associated with royalty from the era of the Assyrians and regarded as creatures of nobility and courage. Also, the lion was the device associated with St. Mark. Lions were seen as being sleepless guardians of the Church. However, they had another nature as well, that of being ferocious beasts. Yet another Eastern hybrid creature was the Griffin, part eagle, part lion, combining the qualities and virtues of both beasts: one the lord of the skies, the other reigning as king of the animals. **(Figure 18)**



Figure 18: *Griffin. Detail from the Bayeux Tapestry – 11th Century
by special permission of the City of Bayeux.*

Griffins were associated with Christ as well as being guardian spirits. In a scene in the Tapestry, where the Normans are despoiling the English countryside, we can see griffins in the border and a rather tipsy looking bull, the traditional symbol of the St. Luke the Evangelist.

Wolves abound in the borders of the Tapestry, either singly or as part of the various Fables. They were known, and feared, for their rapacity, greed and deviousness. St. Wulfstan, “Lupus” (d.1023) published a diatribe, a “Sermon of the Wolf to the English” in 1014.²⁸ This Sermon has a certain relevance to the events depicted in the Tapestry. England was overrun by Scandinavian invaders, and the fault, according to Wulfstan, lay with the English who had earned Divine wrath because of their sins. Eadmer of Canterbury was to make the same judgment of the Conquest: the English were being punished by God for their iniquities.²⁹

Animals appear in another form in the Tapestry: they populate the Fables that are to be found in the borders.³⁰ Aesop’s tales were already widely known in the eleventh century. Marie de France, the great French medieval poet who worked at the court of Henry II and Eleanor of Aquitaine, claimed that she had translated Aesop’s fables from the English original written by King Alfred the Great. R. Howard Bloch believes that the designer of the Tapestry and Marie de France were working from a common source.³¹ There are at least nine fables in the Tapestry,

²⁸ “Sermon of the Wolves to the English,” BL Cotton Nero A f.110.

²⁹ Cited in David M. Wilson, *The Bayeux Tapestry*, 9.

³⁰ Joyce E. Salisbury, “Human Animals of Medieval Fables,” in *Animals in the Middle Ages*, ed. Nora C. Flores (New York: Routledge, 2000), 49-65; Kenneth Clark, *Animals and Men: Their Relationship as Reflected in Western Art* (New York: William Morrow, 1977).

³¹ R. Howard Bloch, *A Needle*, 123.

and they are mainly grouped around the earlier scenes where Harold is embarking on his voyage and engaged with William in the Brittany campaign. The tales include the Fox, Crow and the Cheese. In this fable, trickery was used to capture the tasty morsel, while in the story of Mouse, Frog and the Hawk, greed leads to destruction. Duplicity is the theme of the Wolf and the Crane. Whatever the title of the tale, the moral was always the same: beware of folly, betrayal, ingratitude and injustice. From the Norman perspective, Harold was the usurper, betrayer and oath-breaker. And the clear moral of this embroidered epic is that divine retribution awaits those who transgress. The animals and fables in the borders serve as a commentary, reflection and a warning on the epic narrative as it unfolds in the central frieze of the Tapestry.

Why would the Tapestry be kept and displayed on an annual basis in the nave of the Cathedral at Bayeux? There is, of course, the local interest: with Odo, Bishop of Bayeux, as possible patron, and with so much of historical interest laid out within the narrative. It was here, after all, where Harold took the oath which determined the future of the Duchy and the Kingdom of England. The purpose of the Tapestry, it may be postulated, is a moral and religious one: oaths were broken, and the consequence of sin was made manifest. From the Norman perspective, Harold had arrived in Normandy, and was rescued by William who also befriended him. Together, Normandy's ruler and England's most powerful Earl, had gone hunting and fought in campaigns. William bestowed the gift of arms on Harold. Harold had come to Normandy as an ambassador bearing costly gifts such as a hawk, for a purpose.³² That mission, from a Norman perspective, was to help secure the crown of England for Duke William,

³² Hawks were more expensive than horses and very much a symbol of aristocratic rank. Harold was a keen huntsman, and kept a book on falconry in his library. This book then passed on to William the Conqueror.

according to King Edward's wishes. Harold's failure to meet his promises and oaths was a double crime: a breach of chivalry and the breaking of a solemn oath.

Central to the narrative is the oath-taking scene. **(Figure 19)** Set in the open air, as in pre-Christian days when it was felt that evil spirits would not influence such outdoor events, William is seated upon a cushioned chair. Harold swears, something: the Tapestry despite the Latin titles, is silent as to what exactly is promised. But the assumption is that Harold is promising, on oath, to help William succeed Edward as king of England. There are two reliquaries. One has a gem-stone or perhaps even the Eucharist, the other seems to be a portable reliquary. It is possible that this portable reliquary, or one like it, was later carried in procession along the ranks of Norman soldiers before the Battle of Hastings. It must be remembered that the English sources are entirely silent as to this event, although there were whispers that Harold was overly fond of taking oaths, "more's the pity."³³ The remaining section of the Tapestry demonstrates the consequences of Harold's action.



Figure 19: Harold takes the Oath. Detail from the Bayeux Tapestry – 11th Century

³³ Frank Barlow, *The Life of Edward the Confessor*, 62.

by special permission of the City of Bayeux.

In reality, Harold was William's prisoner. He had no choice but to comply with the demands imposed upon him. An English observer of the Tapestry might see a somewhat hesitant Harold, his arms outstretched in a cruciform position. For the English, such an oath would have no value, having been given under duress. Of course, the Normans had their own view of events. From now on, as the narrative unfolds to its terrible climax, the image of Harold changes. Where he was a sympathetic figure in the earlier panels, he now becomes weighed down with guilt. The Harold who returns to King Edward to give an account of his expedition is not the confident, proud nobleman that we see at the beginning of the narrative. Both Harold and Edward have changed. Harold is now bent over with embarrassment and guilt as a visibly aged king seems to ask, "What have you done?" Indeed, Edward has not long to live. The Tapestry provides us with King Edward's deathbed scene. Around the king are his Queen, Edith, her brother Harold, and a cleric, presumably Archbishop Stigand. Wordlessly, Edward extends his finger to Harold, as he had done in the opening scene of the Tapestry. This time Edward appears to be signaling that Harold, even though he was not of the Royal House of Wessex, should be the next monarch. **(Figure 20)** King Edward the Confessor was to be the only English monarch to undergo the



Figure 20: King Edward on his deathbed. Detail from the Bayeux Tapestry – 11th Century by special permission of the City of Bayeux.

process of canonization, and he became one of the England's patron saints.³⁴ The scene depicting Edward's funeral procession is of some interest. We see bell ringers, which was a Norman funerary custom, along with clerics dressed in lay garments. Orderic Vitalis, a Norman chronicler, speaks of the English clergy as being "rough, barely literate, gluttonous, lustful and effeminate." And, more than that, they wore secular garments as well.³⁵ Lanfranc (1010-1089), who became the first Norman Archbishop of Canterbury, denounced the lax, independent ways of the English Church and persuaded Pope Alexander II (r.1061-1073) of the necessity of bringing the Church into line with the new reformist principles.

William and his clerical supporters, such as the future Archbishop of Canterbury, Lanfranc, couched the Conquest of England in religious terms: it was to be a crusade. Harold,

³⁴ Henry III (r. 1216-1272) promoted the cult of 'Saint Edward' and the Confessor's tomb in Westminster Abbey was a major object of pilgrimage, especially among those who sought healing. Edward is shown giving a ring to a beggar in the famous Wilton Diptych. Bernard W. Scholz, "The Canonization of Edward the Confessor," *Speculum* 36.1 (1961): 38-60.

³⁵ Marjorie Chibnall, *The World of Orderic Vitalis* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), 7.

the oath-breaker, was a usurper who had to be punished: England's Church was to be brought in line with Continental practices. The focus of the Norman religious attack on England was focused on one man, Stigand (990-1072), the controversial Archbishop of Canterbury. He is depicted standing next to a crowned King Harold, with arms raised in blessing, in the style of a Byzantine cleric. **(Figure 21)** Stigand had a lengthy career in the service of the English kings



Figure 21: King Harold & Stigand. Detail from the Bayeux Tapestry – 11th Century
by special permission of the City of Bayeux.

and was particularly close to the Godwin family.³⁶ Robert of Jumièges, Edward's Norman Archbishop, had been forced out of office by the Godwins and the pallium that Stigand wears in the Tapestry belonged to his predecessor. Stigand had never received a proper Papal blessing for his high office. Added to that, he was a pluralist, holding the important and wealthy Sees of Winchester and Canterbury together. His wealth was so great that it was said to almost equal

³⁶ Mary Francis Smith, "Archbishop Stigand and the Eye of the Needle," *Anglo-Norman Studies* XVI (1999): 199-219; H.E.J. Cowdrey, "Stigand," *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford, 2004-2005).

that of Harold himself. It was this “Devil, who lusted after wealth and worldly glory,” that had to be removed. William was to be the sword of God in this reformation of the English Church.

Such then was the Norman view of Stigand and the condition of the Church. However, Stigand appears to have been a dutiful administrator, with his greatest flaw being his close association with the Godwins. It was Stigand who came out from London to Wallingford to offer submission to William. He was allowed to remain in office for a while, although he had to go with William back to Normandy as a kind of hostage. Stigand was deposed and spent his last days in isolation. It is said that Edith came to remonstrate with him, asking for the keys to his alleged treasures. Stigand refused to hand over the keys and later died of starvation.

Harold II, meanwhile, had little joy in his crown. We see him bending down to listen to a messenger who brings news of an ill-omen, the “hairy star.” (**Figure 22**) A Latin rhyme



Figure 22: *The “Hairy Star.” Detail from the Bayeux Tapestry – 11th Century by special permission of the City of Bayeux.*

circulated in Europe saying that in 1066 “the English felt the lash of the comet’s tail.”³⁷ While the English saw the “star” as portending doom, the Normans saw it as a sign of divine favor. We are not told of events that took place in the north of England, with the threat of invasion by Harold’s disgruntled brother Tostig and his powerful ally, Harald Hardrada. It is possible that

³⁷ Lucien Musset, *The Bayeux Tapestry*, 176 -178.

the small fleet of ghostly ships beneath Harold's feet might be a reference of the impending landing in the north. Or the fleet could be another portent of doom, along with the doleful birds with drooping wings that sit in the palace roof.

The final section of the Tapestry belongs more to the realm of military history rather than for any other interpretation. This is not to say that religious elements, symbols, or images are entirely absent. Odo is seen in a prominent position for it is he, the warrior-bishop, who orders the fleet to be built and provisions assembled. It was Odo who, reputedly, supplied forty ships toward the invasion armada.³⁸ And it is Odo who presides over the feast, the iconography of which is seemingly derived from the Last Supper.³⁹ Several equivalents to this scene may be found in manuscripts such as the *Floreffe Bible* from the Meuse Valley, or the carving of the Wedding Feast at Cana, a carving from the narthex of the church of Saint-Fortunat at Charlieu. The Tapestry designer may well have used an image of the Last Supper from an illustrated Gospel that is still to be found in the library at Canterbury. And the cup in Odo's hand is very similar to that of a chalice held by one of the statues in Bayeux Cathedral.⁴⁰ One more overtly religious symbol may be found on William's flagship, the "Mora," which has on its masthead a Byzantine double cross. **(Figure 23)**

³⁸ Robert Wace, *The Roman de Rou* (Société Jersaise, 2002), 233.

³⁹ L. H. Loomis, "The Table of the Last Supper in Religious and Secular Iconography," *Art Studies* 5 (1927): 71-90.

⁴⁰ Eric MacLagan, *The Bayeux Tapestry* (New York: Penguin, 1949), 107



Figure 23: The “Mora” with its Double Cross. Detail from the Bayeux Tapestry – 11th Century by special permission of the City of Bayeux.

Clergymen played a role in the Battle of Hastings itself. English abbots, priests and monks came to do battle with chain mail over their robes. According to Norman sources, the English spent the night before battle carousing and singing, while the Normans resorted to prayer and fasting in preparation for the next day. Odo and Geoffrey, Bishop of Coutances, were there to offer prayers and blessings.⁴¹ Then Normans were emboldened by the thought that the Pope had sent a flag, along with a ring said to contain a strand of St. Peter’s hair: it was after all, a crusade. As we have seen, Odo is given a prominence in the actual Battle of Hastings that is not supported in the chronicle sources, swinging his huge mace and rallying the young men at a time when the Norman cavalry was ready to retreat.

The wages of sin are shown in all their horror: the borders of the Tapestry open up to reveal dead, mutilated and stripped corpses. Cavalry charges pound the shield wall until Harold

⁴¹ Robert Wace, *The Roman de Rou*, 257.

finally falls, perhaps because of an arrow in the eye. **(Figure 24)** This death scene has a moral point: to be blinded meant that he was no longer king-worthy.⁴² Harold's body was cut to pieces,



Figure 24: *Death of Harold. Detail from the Bayeux Tapestry – 11th Century by special permission of the City of Bayeux.*

and it was so mutilated that his common-law (or “Danish”) wife, Edith Swan-neck had to identify the remains. Legend refused to let Harold die: it was said that either he was cured by an Arab woman or that he recovered from his wounds and wandered as a hermit on the Continent. What he could not recover was the ancient Anglo-Saxon kingdom which now had to bow to what later English historians, such as E. A. Freeman (1823-1892) were to describe as the “Norman Yoke.”

At this point the Tapestry closes, with images of broken bodies on the ground and English soldiers fleeing into the distance. The general consensus is that there was a final panel depicting William's coronation.⁴³ Musset is of the opinion that there was no evidence for a final

⁴² Lucien Musset, *The Bayeux Tapestry*, 256-258.

⁴³ Martin K. Foyes reproduces images of Jan Messent's rendering of the ceremony in his *The Bayeux Tapestry: Scholarly Digital Edition*, CD-ROM (Leicester: Scholarly Digital Editions, 2003).

panel, nor is there a need for one. The epic tale of betrayal, usurpation and Divine Wrath had been fully played out in an almost apocalyptic manner.⁴⁴ Having looked at the themes and images in the Tapestry, we can now more fully understand why the nave of the Cathedral of Notre-Dame at Bayeux was a fitting place for its display. The religious background is part of the Tapestry's historical context. Today's pilgrims and visitors may have another, more secular, outlook.

⁴⁴ Lucien Musset, *The Bayeux Tapestry*, 266.