

Bayeux Tapestry: Panel by Panel

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Shire of Wurmwald, Middle Kingdom, Known World

The Tapestry only appears in the surviving records from 1476 as part of the inventory of the Bayeux Cathedral. It is possible that it was in an inaccessible crypt until 1412. It is not mentioned in Henry II's Roman de Rou (his history of the Normans). Its author Wace is well regarded as a thorough researcher and passed through Bayeux several times. So either, he didn't know about it (unlikely) or it wasn't at Bayeux or both.

It contains 626 humans, 202 horses, 55 dogs, 505 other animals, 49 trees, 37 buildings, and 41 ships. Of the 626 humans, only 5 are women. Only 15 people are named.

Originally, scholars thought Queen Matilda had made the Tapestry herself for her husband, William to celebrate his victory. Modern scholars do not believe this anymore. William would have recorded such a gift and it would not have been lost to history for so long. Plus, the tapestry's story is very much from the English perspective, not a Norman one.

A case for Queen Edith is based on the fact that Harold is treated sympathically through the Tapestry. Also, if the fables are cautionary, who are they directed towards? They seem to be directed to Harold.

Another theory is that there are hidden messages that point to Count Eustace being a more central figure to the story and thereby stealing William's thunder.

English tend to be moustached. Mostly no hats.

I am using an 18th century source on the fables. <http://www.aesopfables.com/>

Panel 1 – 4: what is missing is WHY Harold is going to Normandy? Norman sources say he was sent by Edward to pledge himself to William and confirm William as "heir." Other sources say that Harold was going to negotiate the release of his brother and nephew. Harold does come back with his nephew (not in the tapestry).

Panel 4: This is the first fable. The Fable of the Fox and the Crow.

The Fox and the Crow

A Fox once saw a Crow fly off with a piece of cheese in its beak and settle on a branch of a tree. "That's for me, as I am a Fox," and he walked up to the foot of the tree. "Good-day, Mistress Crow," he cried. "How well you are looking to-day: how glossy your feathers; how bright your eye. I feel sure your voice must surpass that of other birds, just as your figure does; let me hear but one song from you that I may greet you as the Queen of Birds." The Crow lifted up her head and began to caw her best, but the moment she opened her mouth the piece of cheese fell to the ground, only to be snapped up by Master Fox. "That will do," said he. "That was all I wanted. In exchange for your cheese I will give you a piece of advice for the future

"Do not trust flatterers."

So, who is the flatterer here? What is the artist saying? According to one of my sources, William is the fox and Harold is the crow and the cheese is the crown of England. If so, did William invite Harold over? On what pretext? If Harold is the flatterer, what is he hoping to gain? This was created after the fact though so we can suppose that all of the cautionary stuff is directed at Harold, i.e. he should have known this was a bad idea.

The next scene in the border looks like it should be a fable as well but I haven't been able to identify it. It may be the Stag at the Pool or a variant thereof. Or maybe the Lion and the Boar

The Stag at the Pool

A STAG overpowered by heat came to a spring to drink. Seeing his own shadow reflected in the water, he greatly admired the size and variety of his horns, but felt angry with himself for having such slender and weak feet. While he was thus contemplating himself, a Lion appeared at the pool and crouched to spring upon him. The Stag immediately took to flight, and exerting his utmost speed, as long as the plain was smooth and open kept himself easily at a safe distance from the Lion. But entering a wood he became entangled by his horns, and the Lion quickly came up to him and caught him. When too late, he thus reproached himself: "Woe is me! How I have deceived myself! These feet which would have saved me I despised, and I gloried in these antlers which have proved my destruction."

What is most truly valuable is often underrated.

The Lion and the Boar

On a summer day, when the great heat induced a general thirst, a Lion and a Boar came at the same moment to a small well to drink. They fiercely disputed which of them should drink first, and were soon engaged in the agonies of a mortal combat. On their stopping on a sudden to take breath for the fiercer renewal of the strife, they saw some Vultures waiting in the distance to feast on the one which should fall first. They at once made up their quarrel, saying: "It is better for us to make friends, than to become the food of Crows or Vultures, as will certainly happen if we are disabled."

Those who strive are often watched by others who will take advantage of their defeat to benefit themselves.

Panel 5: Again, another fable that hasn't been identified yet.

But then, the Wolf and the Crane

A WOLF who had a bone stuck in his throat hired a Crane, for a large sum, to put her head into his mouth and draw out the bone. When the Crane had extracted the bone and demanded the promised payment, the Wolf, grinning and grinding his teeth, exclaimed: "Why, you have surely already had a sufficient recompense, in having been permitted to draw out your head in safety from the mouth and jaws of a wolf."

In serving the wicked, expect no reward, and be thankful if you escape injury for your pains.

And then, the Lion, the Fox, and the Beasts:

The Lion, the Fox and the Beasts

The Lion once gave out that he was sick unto death and summoned the animals to come and hear his last Will and Testament. So the Goat came to the Lion's cave, and stopped there listening for a long time. Then a Sheep went in, and before she came out a Calf came up to receive the last wishes of the Lord of the Beasts. But soon the Lion seemed to recover, and came to the mouth of his cave, and saw the Fox, who had been waiting outside for some time. "Why do you not come to pay your respects to me?" said the Lion to the Fox.

"I beg your Majesty's pardon," said the Fox, "but I noticed the track of the animals that have already come to you; and while I see many hoof-marks going in, I see none coming out. Till the animals that have entered your cave come out again I prefer to remain in the open air."

It is easier to get into the enemy's toils than out again.

This is obviously a cautionary tale to not get involved. And probably directed at Harold that he should not have made the trip.

Panel 6: The Swallow and Birds

The Swallow and the Other Birds

It happened that a Countryman was sowing some hemp seeds in a field where a Swallow and some other birds were hopping about picking up their food. "Beware of that man," quoth the Swallow. "Why, what is he doing?" said the others. "That is hemp seed he is sowing; be careful to pick up every one of the seeds, or else you will repent it." The birds paid no heed to the Swallow's words, and by and by the hemp grew up and was made into cord, and of the cords nets were made, and many a bird that had despised the Swallow's advice was caught in nets made out of that very hemp. "What did I tell you?" said the Swallow.

Destroy the seed of evil, or it will grow up to your ruin.

Then the Wolf and the Goat

The Wolf and the Goat

A WOLF saw a Goat feeding at the summit of a steep precipice, where he had no chance of reaching her. He called to her and earnestly begged her to come lower down, lest she fall by some mishap; and he added that the meadows lay where he was standing, and that the herbage was most tender. She replied, "No, my friend, it is not for the pasture that you invite me, but for yourself, who are in want of food."

Panel 7 and 8: Some of the border scenes are explanatory or seasonal to denote when things happened. So, a hunting scene. Perhaps, Guy was out hunting and ran into Harold?

Panel 9 and 10: A plowing scene so suggesting spring or harvest time?

Panel 10: Who is Tuvold? It is a common name at the time. Is it the taller man gesticulating? If so, it might be a retainer of Odo's, the constable of Bayeux. But it seems the name is meant to go with the dwarf. There is evidence that some Anglo-Saxon artists liked to insert themselves in their work and would do so in miniature. If so, then this might be the person who designed the tapestry. Another theory is that Tuvold the Dwarf is a jongleur and this a tie to the Chanson de Roland.

Panel 11: Not sure what the bear baiting is about. One theory is that Harold is the bear and Guy is the soldier. However, the proponent of this viewpoint also believes the Tapestry is a parallel of the Chanson de Roland. Possibly, this is Bootes so maybe giving a time stamp (June)? Also note, the centaurs in the upper border. Maybe referencing Centaurus again a time stamp (May)?

So panel 10 and 11 seem to be reversed. William is sending messengers before he knows about the situation and does William really need to send messengers twice? That seems out of character for William. But if the time stamps are right, then the panels are not in the wrong order.

Panel 13: Might be a variant on the Eagle and the Kite. In this case, the Virgin and the Suitor. It might also be an image of Adam and Eve.

An Eagle, overwhelmed with sorrow, sat upon the branches of a tree, in company with a Kite. "Why," said the Kite, "do I see you with such a rueful look?" "I seek," she replied, "for a mate suitable for me, and am not able to find one." "Take me," returned the Kite; "I am much stronger than you are." "Why, are you able to secure the means of living by your plunder?" "Well, I have often caught and carried away an ostrich in my talons." The Eagle, persuaded by these words, accepted him as her mate. Shortly after the nuptials, the Eagle said: "Fly off, and bring me back the ostrich you promised me." The Kite, soaring aloft into the air, brought back the shabbiest possible mouse. "Is this," said the Eagle, "the faithful fulfillment of your promise to me?" The Kite replied: "That I might attain to your royal hand, there is nothing that I would not have promised, however much I knew that I must fail in the performance."

Promises of a suitor must be taken with caution.

Also in Panel 13, Guy's horse is drawn much skinner and with long ears like a donkey. Some suggest that this is offered as an insult to Guy in the Tapestry, as he and William were often at odds. However, panels 9 and 10 have Guy on a normal horse. So, hard to say what is going on here.

Panel 15: This is the most controversial panel. Who is Aelgifa? Is it Emma? Cnut's first wife? Harold's sister? William's daughter? Is this a sex scandal? We just don't have enough information to know.

Panel 16: Here is the second Fox and Crane image. The Fox has the cheese now. If William is the fox, does that mean he flattered Harold into accompanying him to war and has now basically gotten what he wants?

Panel 17: What is the meaning of the fish and eels? The fish might be Pisces and then another time stamp (August through January). Is this a trap for Harold that he escaped? Is it another fable? A variant on the farmer and the snake?

The Farmer and the Snake

One winter a Farmer found a Snake stiff and frozen with cold. He had compassion on it, and taking it up, placed it inside his coat where it was warm.

The Snake was quickly revived by the warmth, and resuming its natural instincts, bit the Farmer, giving him a mortal wound.

"Oh," cried the Farmer with his last breath, "I should have known better than to pity a scoundrel."

The greatest kindness will not bind the ungrateful.

Panel 18: Another Centaur, Sagittarius? (August)

Panel 23: What oath exactly? This is where the Normans say Harold swore to uphold William's claim. But even if he did so, William would have had to know how the process worked and that Harold's help would not necessarily mean anything.

Panel 24: The third instance of the Fox and Crow. The Crow has the cheese again and the two characters are separated. We also have the second instance of the Wolf and Crane.

Panel 26 and 27: seem to be in reverse order. Edward is carried away in a casket before he dies.

Panel 30: Halley's comet (March 1066) is here to help give a time reference. Also an ill omen.

Panel 31: The ships may be what Harold is being told about.

Panel 32: Maybe Pisces again (August).

Panel 39: Who is Wadard? This is a rare name so we can be reasonably sure this is one of Odo's retainers.

Panel 46: It could be the English burning their own houses to deny them to William or it could be William burning houses.

Panel 47: Perhaps this is the fable of the Travellers and the Axe. If so then, does it mean that Harold and William made an agreement of some sort? Or perhaps one of the Normans has been left out of the spoils of war?

The Two Travelers and the Axe

TWO MEN were journeying together. One of them picked up an axe that lay upon the path, and said, "I have found an axe." "Nay, my friend," replied the other, "do not say 'I,' but 'We' have found an axe." They had not gone far before they saw the owner of the axe pursuing them, and he who had picked up the axe said, "We are undone." "Nay," replied the other, "keep to your first mode of speech, my friend; what you thought right then, think right now. Say 'I,' not 'We' are undone."

He who shares the danger ought to share the prize.

Not sure what the naked people mean.

Then Wild Ass and the Lion

The Wild Ass and the Lion

A WILD ASS and a Lion entered into an alliance so that they might capture the beasts of the forest with greater ease. The Lion agreed to assist the Wild Ass with his strength, while the Wild Ass gave the Lion the benefit of his greater speed. When they had taken as many beasts as their necessities required, the Lion undertook to distribute the prey, and for this purpose divided it into three shares. "I will take the first share," he said, "because I am King: and the second share, as a partner with you in the chase: and the third share (believe me) will be a source of great evil to you, unless you willingly resign it to me, and set off as fast as you can."

Might makes right.

Panel 50: The cave might be part of the Lion, Fox, and the Beasts again. Or it might be The Bitch and her Whelps

The Bitch and Her Whelps

A BITCH, ready to whelp, earnestly begged a shepherd for a place where she might litter. When her request was granted, she besought permission to rear her puppies in the same spot. The shepherd again consented. But at last the Bitch, protected by the bodyguard of her Whelps,

who had now grown up and were able to defend themselves, asserted her exclusive right to the place and would not permit the shepherd to approach.

So, who are the fables for?

Almost all of the fables appear in panels with Harold or that mention Harold. Only the last one doesn't. And most of the fables are cautionary about wicked people.

We know the English made the Tapestry. Since the fables appear with Harold, they must be either warning Harold or be about Harold. The Tapestry was also made after the events so the makers knew the outcome.

If Odo commissioned the Tapestry, then the fables might be a thumbing of the nose to the Normans. But it doesn't explain why they are all focused on Harold. If Edith commissioned the Tapestry, then the fables might be a reminder to her about what happened to her brother. Edith kept most of her lands and influence. Perhaps, the designer of the tapestry wanted to warn her or remind her of what happened to her brother and to be very careful.

If the Tapestry is made by Eustace, then again perhaps the warning images are meant to remind Eustace of the dangers of the Normans. But the English had no love of Eustace either and Eustace was well-aware of William's personality.

Sources:

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Wilson, David, *The Bayeux Tapestry*, Thames & Hudson, London, 2004. – primary source of discussion of fables in the Tapestry

Hicks, Carola, *The Bayeux Tapestry The Life Story of a Masterpiece*, Vintage Books, London 2006 – primary source for Queen Edith theory