

Messages in the Tapestry – A look at messages in the Bayeux Tapestry and who they were meant for.

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Summary

History of the Bayeux Tapestry

It is believed that the Tapestry was created around 1076¹. The Tapestry only appears in the surviving records from 1476 as part of the inventory of the Bayeux Cathedral². 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. Wace also ends up as Canon of Bayeux later in his life. So either, he didn't know about it (unlikely) or it wasn't at Bayeux or both.³

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 prospective, 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.⁴

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.⁵

Two Voices

It is my opinion that the *tituli* were added to the Tapestry after it was complete. It is likely that it was added very soon afterwards but it was not planned as part of the Tapestry from the beginning.

England had produced many beautiful manuscripts and embroidered pieces before the Tapestry. They were a literate society and an artful one. From the manuscripts, we know that they were very capable of incorporating art images and text images with a great deal of skill. Yet in the Tapestry, this is missing. The text is haphazard. It runs into art images. It is forced into open spaces and breaks in awkward places. The text lines lack the smoothness and precision of those manuscripts. If the *tituli* were preplanned, surely the Designer would have made a space for those words. The borders would have been a perfect place.

As further evidence, the Designer does eliminate the border in some locations. In Panel 36, when William is crossing the channel, the top border is removed to make room for the ships. The Designer also changes the nature of the borders when the war starts. This is a person who is not locked into a given design; he changes it as the situation call for it. He certainly would have made the appropriate place for *tituli* if he was going to use them.

It is unlikely that an actual scribe would be used but there is strong evidence that the Tapestry was produced in Canterbury. And even if it was not, Anglo-Saxon England had many cathedrals with access to well-done manuscripts. Some of the arguments below suggest that images in the Tapestry mirror those found in famous manuscripts in Canterbury. So, the Designer of the Tapestry would definitely had known about writing and if he was inclined to copy images, he probably would have been inclined to copy writing styles.

The other issue with the narrative is that our Narrator has incomplete knowledge. He is quite verbose after the Normans land in England. We get great detail about the breakfast after the landing and what exactly Odo was doing. But we get virtually no detail about the burning house, about Aelgyva, and exactly what Harold was doing in Normandy. This is the clearest reason why the Narrator and the Designer are not working together. The Designer must have known exactly what he was trying to show. He knew whether the priest was blessing or chastising Aelgyva. He would have known what role she played in the story he was showing pictographically. Yet, our Narrator doesn't tell us.

A popular scholarly theory is that the Narrator is being deliberately vague with Aelgyva. I do not buy the argument that this was some well-known scandal. Starting in Panel 33 (see appendix for panels), where William has ships built, our Narrator tells us many details that are clearly shown in the images. The cart clearly has a wine cask. The horses are clearly leaving the ships. Servants are clearly cooking a meal. Why tell us details like this yet keep events prior to the Invasion vague? The Aelgyva scene is immediately after the scene where Harold arrives at William's court. This is likely connected to why Harold is visiting Normandy. It is my belief that the Narrator just doesn't know. But the Designer had to know. The Designer had to know, "in this scene, Harold is asking William for his daughter's hand in marriage and the priest is anointing her," or whatever the scene is actually about. He drew it and therefore had to have some idea what he was drawing and why.

Another important scene that is vague is the oath scene. I am being vague because the Narrator doesn't tell us what oath Harold is swearing. This is also a problem. If this is indeed Norman propaganda, this should be crystal clear. Many Norman historians tell us that Harold is swearing to uphold William's claim to the English Crown. However, a few historians have suggested that this is just the swearing of vassalage due to the presentation of arms. The *tituli* should be saying what exactly Harold swore an oath to do. Given the detail later, it is odd that these important details are left out now. I don't believe the Narrator is deliberately vague.

If this is then true, our Narrator is not the same as our Designer. One scholar makes the argument that the narrative and the placement of those words is giving a hidden message about the role of Eustace of Flanders in the Invasion. This is very possible. But since the Narrator and the Designer are not the same person, it is possible that there are multiple messages aimed at different audiences.

Messages in the Design

Fables

One of the central questions in the Tapestry is whether the border images mean anything. There is no doubt that the images are purposeful; that is, they were chosen on purpose. But do any of them mean anything? Most scholars agree that some images do mean something while others are decorative. But without a clear idea who designed the Tapestry and who they expected to see it, it is difficult to know exactly which images are meaningful and which are not.

That being said, several images do suggest connections to Aesop's Fables, biblical references, and other manuscripts that would be present in Canterbury. So, if there are references, what do they mean? If

they mean something, who was supposed to identify with that meaning? Many scholars have their opinion and I also have mine.⁶

One fable appears three times in the Tapestry and I think it holds the clue to who the messages are for. The border image of the Fox and The Crow appears three times in the Tapestry. Once in Panel 4, once in Panel 16, and once in Panel 24. In Panel 4, the cheese is in mid-air. In Panel 16, the Fox has the cheese. And in Panel 24, the two figures are physically separated and the Crow has the cheese. Panel 4 is where Harold is leaving by sea. Panel 16 is William is attacking Mons St Michael. Panel 24 is where Harold returns to England.

Here is a rendering of the Fable of the Fox and the Crow.

The Fox and the Crow⁷

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."

It has been suggested that this is an allegory for the fate of the English Crown. In Panel 4, it is in play. In panels 16 and 24, one side or the other has firm control of it. So, which is Harold and which is William? I think the Panel 16 gives us the best clue. The Fox has control of the cheese in this panel. Harold does not appear in the panel at all. If Harold is the Fox, how is William's attack on Mons St Michael, giving the crown to Harold? Shortly thereafter, Harold is presented arms and we get to the oath-swearing scene. Harold does not seem to be in charge here. William, however, does. I think it is clear that William is the Fox in this story. So, Harold is the Crow.

One scholar has suggested that Harold is the Fox and therefore not to be trusted. But this instance of the fable seems out of place if that is true. If it were at the oath-swearing scene, then yes, Harold as the Fox seems likely. But in this scene, Harold is totally at William's control. He is going to war with William and saves some Norman knights from quicksand. Was this a trap for Harold? I have no evidence for that. But if William is the Fox in this scene, then he is the Fox in all scenes. The fable is a warning about William.

If like the previous scholar suggested, that this was a hidden message about Harold, that also seems out of place. The main action delivers the message that Harold swore an oath and broke his word quite well. Why hide that message? And why reinforce it in an obscure way? It only makes sense if it is a hidden message.

If we accept that William is the Fox and Harold the Crow, the message is that the Crow shouldn't trust the flattering Fox. Harold should not have trusted William.

Another fable that appears multiple times is the Fable of the Wolf and the Crane

The Wolf and the Crane⁸

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.

This appears in Panel 5, where Harold sails for the land of Count Guy and again in Panel 24 when Harold returns to England.

This is very clear in my opinion. Harold is the Crane. He has journeyed to Normandy and escaped.

These are the most important of the fable images because they are repeated. There are other potential fable images though.

Again in panel 4, next to the Fox and Crow, is a scene that shows an animal drinking and another animal nearby. This might be either the Fable of the Stag at the Pool or the Lion and the Boar.

The Stag at the Pool⁹

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 Boar¹⁰

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.

In Panel 5 where Harold comes to the Land of Count Guy, this might be the Fable of the Lion, the Fox, and the Beasts

The Lion, the Fox and the Beasts¹¹

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.

Immediately after, we get a bird in a field and a lion and a goat. These might be the The Fable of the Swallow and the Birds and the Fable of the Wolf and the Goat.

The Swallow and the Other Birds¹²

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.

The Wolf and the Goat¹³

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."

There are a few other potential fable images but they are even more vague. However, the ones listed here are pretty clear. They all happen in scenes with Harold or about Harold. They are all cautionary. I

do not believe they are random as they all have a similar message. Nor, do I believe that they are aimed at William. One, the Tapestry is after the events in 1066 and William was victorious. He does not need to be warned. Two, in most of these scenes, Harold is moving into William's sphere of influence. Warnings are appropriate at this time. They would be foreshadowing or omens. Three, I believe these were messages, thinly veiled, for someone would be looking at what happened to Harold and might need reminding.

Timing or Seasons

Panels 6, 7, and 8 have a hunting scene in the border. Panels 9 and 10 have a scene of fields being plowed and someone fowling. Panel 11 has a scene of bear baiting. Gale Owen-Crocker in *Harold II and the Bayeux Tapestry*¹⁴ shows that the constellations of Ursus Major, Centaurus, Serpentarius, Pisces, Taurus, Leo, Hydra, Sirius, Lepus, and Bootes all appear in the Tapestry and look like their depiction in Cicero-Aratea, a complication of medieval constellations. And of course famously, Halley's Comet appears as well. It is possible that the Designer is giving us a sense of time with his use of these images.

There are two images in Panel 11 that might be time stamps. There are two centaur figures in the top border. Neither holds a bow. This might be the constellation Centaurus. The time stamp would be then be around May. The bear-baiting scene in Panel 11 could be Bootes and therefore giving us a time stamp of June.

If those are true, then in Panel 10, the scene is one of plowing and planting and shows us that things are happening in the Spring.

Panel 17 has two fish. This might be Pisces. If so, our time stamp is August at the earliest.

Panel 18 has a centaur again. It does not appear to have a bow but it does appear to be involved in a hunt. So, maybe Sagittarius which reinforces the August date for Panel 17.

Panel 30 has Halley' Comet. It is calculated that this would be March 1066.

Panel 31 and 32 (they overlap a bit) might have Pisces again. This is a clearer representation than Panel 17. If so, this is making it August 1066.

Who are the images for?

If we look at the fables, they are mostly cautionary tales. Who are they for? I believe the Fox and Crow give us the biggest clue. The fable is a reminder to the audience that William is not to be trusted. Who would need that reminder? The two most likely people who would have seen this are Queen Edith and Bishop Odo.

Edith is Harold's sister and one of the few English nobles to keep their lands after the invasion. She might have commissioned the Tapestry. She certainly would have seen it in that case and the warnings could be directed to her, "remember what happened to your brother."

Odo figures prominently in the Tapestry and is featured with William. It is a historical fact that Odo was part of a revolt against William around 1087 and was forced into exile. Perhaps it was known that Odo and William would be headed for a crisis. The warnings could be directed at him. If Odo did receive the Tapestry, and history tells us it was rediscovered in Bayeux, Odo may have hid it before going into exile.

The warnings do not seem to be directed at William though. One, he won. Two, there is no evidence that William knew about the existence of the Tapestry. There is also no evidence that the Tapestry was available for general viewing on regular basis between its creation and its listing in 1476. So, very few people would have had the opportunity to view it closely enough to notice the messages.

Therefore, only the designer, the commissioner, and the recipient are in the position to really see the Tapestry to understand the messages. It is pretty clear to me that the messages are warning against William. I believe it is likely that Edith commissioned the Tapestry, possibly for Odo. Edith would have had the connections to artisans to make the work. The sympathetic treatment of Harold would make sense for Edith. Highlighting Odo in the second part would make sense if he was the recipient. Ideally, both Edith and Odo would have had good information on what actually happened in Normandy and the messages in the Tapestry would have been understood: William achieved his goals but look at where trusting him got Harold. Beware the Conquerer.

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Appendix

The Panels

See attached Powerpoint slides¹⁵

References

¹ (Bridgeford, 2005)

² (Fowke, 1913)

³ (Tr: Taylor, 1837)

⁴ (Hicks, 2006)

⁵ (Bridgeford, 2005)

⁶ (Wilson, 2004)

⁷ (Tr: Townsend, 1887) listed on <http://www.sacred-texts.com/cla/aesop/>

⁸ (Tr: Townsend, 1887)

⁹ (Tr: Townsend, 1887)

¹⁰ (Tr: Townsend, 1887)

¹¹ (Tr: Townsend, 1887)

¹² (Tr: Townsend, 1887)

¹³ (Tr: Townsend, 1887)

¹⁴ (Owen-Crocker, 2011)

¹⁵ (Wilson, 2004)