

The Bayeux Tapestry: The Case of the Phantom Fleet

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Figure 1

29.2 to 30 metres of the *Bayeux Tapestry*

(From *The Tapestry of Bayeux in Vetusta monumenta*, vol. VI, pt 1 (London: The Society of Antiquaries, 1819–23), plates 7–8)

There is a large bibliography of secondary works concerning the *Bayeux Tapestry*¹, but when one reads much of the published material it is clear that a high proportion of this comment, as one would expect, copies and builds on previous authors. It is the contention of this article that much of this writing is flawed by the acceptance of a specious 'tradition' that has accumulated in the face of common sense and the use of one's own eyes. Perhaps what is needed is an innocent eye, for the Tapestry appears

¹ There are 523 items listed in S.A. Brown, *The Bayeux Tapestry: history and bibliography* (Woodbridge: Boydell, 1988), and the list must have grown in the last ten years.

uncomplicated enough and it is difficult to believe that it was composed for a small and select audience consisting of a committee of academics and a laity able to comprehend the symbolism of a series of arcane subjects without need of an interlocutor. Although the concept of a commentator or guide would explain the apparent keys given for an explanation of various points, it is not something that has yet been postulated, and therefore we must hope for simple and clear answers arising from the Tapestry itself, assuming the audience thought in an equally simple and clear way. The aspect of the Tapestry I wish to discuss begins at 29.2 metres from the left-hand margin of the Tapestry² with Harold II Godwinson enthroned. There are many explanations of this scene, and perhaps we should start with the example of Denny and Filmer-Sankey,³ which links the main elements of the narrative into the present-day accepted form:

A strange star appears in the sky, a comet with a fiery tail, and the people gaze at it in terror. An astrologer tells Harold that this is an omen of misfortune. In the border below this scene we see the ghostly outlines of ships stealing across the sea. Perhaps this was Harold's dream as he lay troubled by the thought of the oath he had broken and the doom which might follow the breaking of his oath.

There are many inter-related discussions of this episode, but the 'modern' interpretation possibly began with Bruce,⁴ who wrote a description of the scene:

King Harold on his throne, bending down his ear very eagerly to a messenger who has arrived with important intelligence. The nature of it is explained by the dreamy-like flotilla which is shown in the lower border.

and whose view was endorsed by Freeman,⁵ thus becoming the accepted interpretation of the events.

The speaker is surely the interpreter of the sign, and that interpreter a Kalchas or a Micaiah. It is quite possible that what Dr. Bruce calls 'the dreamy-like flotilla' in the border may be meant darkly to set forth the nature of his interpretation, and so to act as a connecting link between this compartment and that which comes next after it.

² There is no agreed method of identifying the individual scenes and areas of the Tapestry. It would be more sensible and consistent with modern practice to measure from the beginning of the Tapestry, i.e. the left-hand margin, so that the point could be described as at 29.2 metres; if necessary the upper or lower margins can be specified, or in specific cases the height up the Tapestry from the bottom hem. The alternative would have been to use the system that depends on the nineteenth-century numbering which was painted on the backing sheet.

³ N. Denny and J. Filmer-Sankey, *The Bayeux Tapestry: the Norman Conquest 1066* (London: Collins, 1966).

⁴ J.C. Bruce, *The Bayeux Tapestry elucidated* (London, 1856).

⁵ E.A. Freeman, *The history of the Norman Conquest of England, its causes and results*, iii (Oxford: 1859). Appendix M, Vol. III is 'The Comet of 1066' (page 644 commenting on page 72).

The fantasy interpretations and the conspiracy theories that follow from them ultimately stem from this 'dreamy-like' flotilla and the fact that these interpretations have never been confronted. Most commentators accept the 'omen's' relation to the figures of Harold and one other person, and the 'phantom fleet'. Other details are added by other writers, such as 'terror' on the face of Harold or 'birds of ill-omen' on the roof of the building. It should be noted, however, that the gesture of pointing to oneself, adopted by Harold, usually means that that individual is the one speaking. It should also be noted in passing that needlework is not a medium that lends itself to much in the way of the depiction of facial expression. Therefore to describe Harold's face as registering 'terror' is an expression of what lies in the eye of the beholder. There are many birds in the upper border of the Tapestry, some of which appear perched on the roof of a building (for example at 8.5 metres on the roof of the hall at Beaurain, at 11.5 metres, and with peacocks at 15 metres). The ones on Westminster Hall have been singled out as birds of ill-omen, with no textual authority.

Perhaps we should begin by concentrating on the comet and the inscription, 'Isti mirant stellam'. These three words should not be difficult to deal with: *These men marvel at the star*,⁶ or *These ones marvel at the star*. The key word is 'mirant', which the dictionaries rendered 'wonder'.⁷ There are embellishments added to some translations such as Bertrand (1966), 'Ils regardent avec étonnement une étoile', but the commentators are unanimous about the comet's import. For example, Maclagan (1943) claims that 'At Easter-time a comet, identified as Halley's, terrified the Western world'; This would appear to extend the meaning of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*: 'Then over all England there was seen a sign in the skies such as had never been seen before. Some said it was the star "comet" which some call the long-haired star, and it first appeared on the eve of the Greater Litany, that is 24 April, and so shone all the week'.⁸ The *Chronicle* then proceeds to report Tostig's fleet. No other comment appears; 'terror' is not mentioned.

In a poem which describes a wall-hanging inspired in some way by the *Bayeux Tapestry* and written before 1102, Baudri de Bourgueil in his *Adelae Comitissae*, describes the arrival of this comet in pragmatic terms, certainly not specific to Harold's fate.

⁶ E. Maclagan, *The Bayeux Tapestry* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1943); F. Wormald in F.M. Stenton, *The Bayeux Tapestry: a comprehensive survey* (New York: Phaidon, 1957); and with minor emendations such as J.B. McNulty, *The narrative art of the Bayeux Tapestry master* (New York: AMS Press, 1989).

⁷ R.E. Latham, *Revised medieval Latin word-list from British and Irish sources* (Oxford: University Press, 1965).

⁸ D. Whitelock (ed.), *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle: a revised translation* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1961), 140.

The older generation is dumbfounded and marvels,
 and what they see they pronounce to be great signs.
 Mothers suckling their darling babes
 strike both breast and mouth and dread new portents.
 A younger generation seeks answers from its elders,
 and inquisitive boys hang on the lips of old men.
 What the sign betokens they know not — though they say they know:
 It is allowed to the many to invest much.
 (translated by Michael W. Herren).⁹

The import is supplied by the medieval and modern commentators. Other eleventh-century views (but still after the event) include those in the Icelandic Sagas linking the comet with the death of Harald Hardada; and Adam of Bremen linking it with the death of his Archbishop and reverses in the wars against the Slavs.

What then does the scene show? First, we must step back from the Tapestry and recognize that one of the major faults with the study of the Tapestry today is that we are held in a vice, consisting of the shape and size of colour slides in the lecture room or the dimensions of a book of reproductions. We see the Tapestry as a series of rectangles. But most commentators note that the Tapestry consists of scenes, and scenes 33 and 34 are part of a larger grouping. It is impossible to represent in this journal such a major scene, as the length is too great for its height, but it is a wide scene such that a spectator in a Cathedral would be struck by the blocking and grouping of figures and scenes. Figure 2 is a little diagram showing five metres of the scene from 25.4 metres to 30.1



Figure 2
 Westminster
 (Drawn by David Hill)

metres. The scene set in the built-up area of the Royal complex at Westminster is a grouping of buildings linked into one whole by the action, and by the continuous cobbled streets. The events take place in the series of frames that the buildings and the scenes provide. Artistically a certain symmetry is evident, for at each end there is a king enthroned within a building, Edward the Confessor at the beginning and Harold II Godwinson at the end. What then is the building framing Harold? In Ball and Gem's reconstruction of Edward the Confessor's Westminster (Fig. 3)¹⁰ we can see, beyond the tower of the Abbey, the buildings of the Palace, in

⁹ Brown, *Bayeux Tapestry*, 168.

¹⁰ After Terry Ball and Richard Gem in A. Vince, *Saxon London: an archaeological investigation* (London: Seaby, 1990).

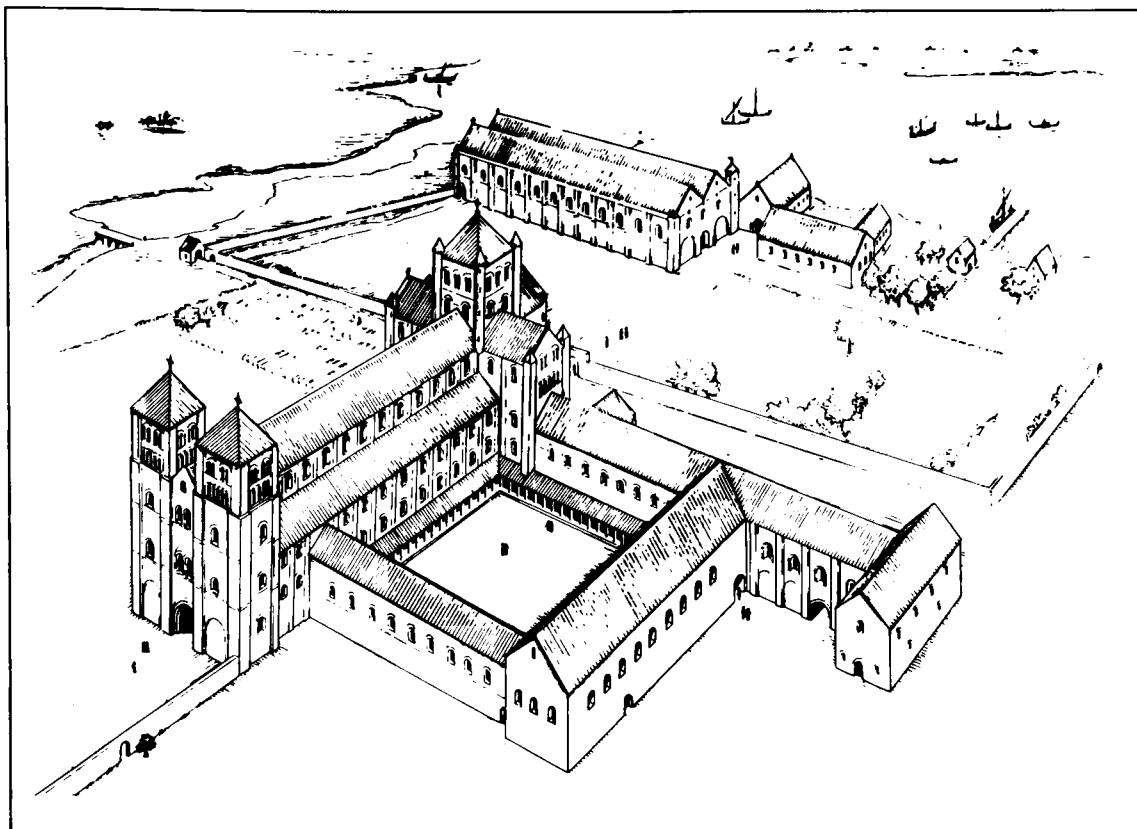


Figure 3

An artist's reconstruction of Westminster *circa* 1070, looking north-east towards London. The Thames is in the background and the Tyburn inlet is on the left.

particular the Great Hall. This was later replaced on the same site by William Rufus's Hall.¹¹ It can be seen in the reconstruction to be next to the Thames on which ships float. In the *Bayeux Tapestry* the design has run from the hall into the border to show ships on the Thames. If the orientation in the Tapestry was correct it would be showing ships on the inlet made by the Tyburn to the north of the Great Hall, but this would seem to be hoping for too much in the way of detailed topographical observation. It has been noted by several commentators that the ships lack sails, shield, oars or crew. Similar representations are to be found at 33.5 metres and at 40.5 metres where the ships are beached and not sailing. The ships in the border beneath the illustration of the Great Hall are floating and not sailing. This would not be unusual if the five ships represent the royal fleet which was laid up as hulls at Westminster regularly each winter. Much has been made of the fact that the ships are not fully coloured, but there are other examples of this within the Tapestry. It is infrequent but not exceptional.¹² The phantom fleet turns out to be part of the design of Westminster

¹¹ H.M. Colvin, *The history of the King's works*, ii (London: H.M.S.O., 1963).

¹² Examples include bare flesh (always uncoloured in figures), the sea, water generally, and some border details particularly in later scenes.

and the first representation of the English Fleet. It is known that London was the fleet base in Harold II Godwinson's reign.¹³

This explanation fits with a judicious application of Occam's Razor.¹⁴ Recent excavations on the site of the Tyburn mouth, opposite the present Westminster Hall, have uncovered the inlet and the possible eleventh-century quay.¹⁵

I would not dismiss all discussion of the elements of the design of the Tapestry, rather I would note the 1958 remarks of Emile Mâle that 'the old craftsmen were never so subtle as their modern interpreters, ... There is much in medieval art', Mâle argued, 'that requires no elaborate explanation'. Mâle sensibly warned against 'ingenious archaeologists' for whom 'even the tiniest flower or smallest grinning monster has a meaning'.¹⁶ But it would be perverse to ignore the floating seated figure at 17.3 metres who is clearly pointing at Mont St Michel and had an importance to earlier viewers of the Tapestry. He is part of the story, although that part is lost. There may be other figures, and it is to that possibility I focus the second part of this short note.

To recapitulate: the link between the comet and the fleet is broken; the soothsayer is not a sooth-sayer; the look of terror does not exist on Harold's face; the birds of ill-omen have flown and the fleet is real and not phantom. What are we left with? I would suggest that looking at the symmetry of the scene, the block of



Figure 4

From 30 to 31.1 metres of the *Bayeux Tapestry*

(From *The Tapestry of Bayeux*, in *Vetusta monumenta*, vol. VI, pt. 1, plate 8).

¹³ Vince, *Saxon London*.

¹⁴ William of Occam, English scholastic philosopher (d. c. 1350). Occam's razor is the principle that in explaining a thing no more assumptions should be made than are necessary.

¹⁵ Personal communication from Robert Cowie.

¹⁶ E. Mâle, *The Gothic image: religious art in France of the thirteenth century*, translated by D. Nussey (London: Fontana, 1958).

Westminster buildings containing important parts of the story is symmetrically linked to the rest of the narrative by messengers arriving and a ship leaving. Clearly we are expecting the flow of the story to continue with a messenger leaving from Westminster Hall. The armed man is that messenger and he is one of the figures in the ship at 30.4 metres and finally is in William's Hall at 31.5 metres, presenting the message that triggers off the building of the Norman fleet. The link scene is marked by the traditional device in the Tapestry of ending scenes with a tree. The link is the ship from 30.1 metres to 31.1 metres. Freeman¹⁷ discusses the two embassies from William to Harold. The first claimed the throne and the second offered a compromise and referred to the betrothal of Harold to William's daughter. Both embassies were rejected. To the right of the picture of Westminster Hall is a tree (at 30.1 metres), a common image to mark the end of one scene and the beginning of another. Immediately above and below that tree (although modern photographs record a slant in the Tapestry due to warping) are two images that **may be** intended to clarify the story, or even to provide keys to the viewer or interlocutor. Many claims have been made for the significance of the border figures in the *Bayeux Tapestry*, most of which would appear to have been inspired, perhaps at several removes, from Byzantine textiles.

At 30.2 metres, in the upper border above the tree that marks a new scene, is a figure who may be running or kneeling and looking, who has a baton or staff in his hand. The question must be asked whether this figure is not Aesopian, as has been claimed,



Figure 5
The figure at 30.2 metres (upper)
(From *The Tapestry of Bayeux*, plate 8)

¹⁷ Freeman, *History of the Norman Conquest*, iii, 701–3. Appendix U: 'The embassies exchanged between William and Harold'.

but a representation of a herald, ambassador or messenger?¹⁸ In other words, is the scene of the English ship travelling to William a representation of the reply to the two messages sent by the Duke and being rejected, thus linking into all the other events? But the two counter-swimming fish below the tree are clearly linked to other Anglo-Saxon manuscript illustrations of the zodiacal sign, Pisces, that for the period 19 February to 20 March. I cannot find other clear examples of zodiacal signs within the Tapestry and suggest that there may be a significance to the two figures above and below the tree beyond mere decoration.

There is time for the period of visibility of the comet to overlap with the zodiac period for Pisces. If the illustration of the comet is to indicate a specific period of time, and the running figure to denote an ambassador or messenger, then Pisces could be showing that the message was sent within the period 19 February to 20 March.

There is time in any timetable for the coronation news to reach Normandy and two messengers from William to be sent to England and be rejected. This scene shows that rejection which then leads inevitably on to the decision of William and Odo to begin building their fleet in time for a summer expedition.

Thus we should interpret the scene as showing that the remarkable comet is first seen in the sky at the time when Harold, seated in his hall, with the hulks of his fleet still laid peacefully up outside, instructs (it is a convention within the Tapestry that the person speaking wags his finger) a figure of some status (he carries his sword) to carry a message to William. This is explained or



Figure 6

Two fish in the border at 30.1 metres (lower)
(From *The Tapestry of Bayeux*, plate 9)

¹⁸ McNulty, *Narrative art*, describes the figure as 'a watchman, an informant'. L. Herrmann *Les Fables antiques de la broderie de Bayeux* (Brussels: Latomus, 1964), 46, makes the figure 'a bird catcher' from Cato.

pointed up by the Pisces sign and the messenger whose arrival triggers off the activity of ship building and the major sequence of the Tapestry.

The Chronology of the Comet

