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Standing on Rocky Ground: Terrain in the Bayeux Embroidery

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The Bayeux Embroidery has long been recognized as replete with ambiguities that have given rise to the textile's long history of contested interpretations. For example, many scholars have remarked on the terse inscriptions that impart little in the way of crucial information at critical junctures in the narrative such as in the opening scene where Edward the Confessor is in dialog with Harold Godwinson, Earl of Kent (Fig. 1). The inscription above reads only "King Edward," thus failing to tell the viewer anything about what the two men are discussing. This is a particularly curious omission since the episode sets the stage for all the events that follow and the medieval written texts detailing the Norman Conquest present differing accounts of this crucial conversation.[1] Consequently, we are left to decide for ourselves whether Edward is sending Harold to Normandy, and if so, what Harold's mission is. The parallel conversation when Harold returns from his journey fails to clear anything up as the inscription merely states that Harold returned to the English and came to Edward (Fig. 2). In between these two conversations lie all the events comprising Harold's capture by Guy of Ponthieu; his rescue by William, Duke of Normandy; his support of William during the campaign against Conan of Brittany; and his swearing of an oath to William.

Fig. 1. Harold and an Unidentified Man Meet with King Edward, Detail of the Bayeux Tapestry, 11th century, Courtesy of the City of Bayeux.

Fig. 2. Harold Returns to King Edward, Detail of the Bayeux Tapestry, 11th century, Courtesy of the City of Bayeux.

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The embroidery's terse inscriptions are just one area where scholars have found room for debate. Speculation concerning the work's commissioning, in particular its patronage, has dominated its study with suggestions ranging from William's queen, Matilda; Edward's queen, Edith; Count Eustace II of Boulogne, and most especially Bishop Odo of Bayeux, William's half-brother.[2] While Sir Frank Stenton's support of Odo has gained scholarly consensus, Elisabeth Pastan and Stephen White have questioned the model of a single patron in their recent monograph on the embroidery. It is their contention that Odo was one of a network of benefactors to the Abbey of St. Augustine, Canterbury, whose monks actively commissioned the embroidery and determined its design.[3]

The function and meaning of the lively creatures and scenes inhabiting the textile's borders has also sparked lively debate. For Francis Wormald this feature bears no relation to the main narrative beyond amusing decoration.[4] For others, notably David Bernstein, the creatures, fables, and "genre scenes" comment on the actors in the central drama and adopt a pro-Norman stance or conversely represent a (sometimes) coded Early English subversion possibly worked in by the embroidery's stitchers.[5]

The embroidery's ambiguities and anomalies have also led to analyzing the representational strategies employed in the narrative. Scholars have noted such features as relative size, location, and attitudes of figures at given points, the attributes granted to Edward, Harold, William, Guy and Odo, and the visual gendering of horses, to name a few of the major elements.[6] Within the profusion of scholarly discourse, however, one strategy has so far gone unnoticed: the form of the ground on which the action takes place. Throughout the embroidery the ground line varies from level to undulating, but in certain episodes this variation occurs within a single scene. In its level form the groundline serves as the lower border of the central panel, suggesting that the undulation is a deliberate introduction to the given episode's composition and thus deserves closer consideration.

Of the episodes featuring the combination of level and undulating ground line, most seem to use it to reinforce relative status and power dynamics among the figures. However, there are three instances in which this primary purpose is augmented by a secondary function that helps drive the narrative by pointing to the cause of William's ultimate invasion: Harold's duplicity and lust for power. The three episodes in which the alternating groundline performs this function are the encounter between Harold and Guy of Ponthieu (Figs. 4 and 5), the Oath-Taking scene (Fig. 3) and Harold's Report back to Edward (Fig. 2). In each case, the alternation between

level and undulating ground serves to disempower Harold and, due to the scene's significance within the larger narrative, identify him as the cause of his own downfall.

Fig. 3. Harold Taking a Oath to William, Detail of the Bayeux Embroidery, 11th century http://www.hs-augsburg.de/~harsch/Chronologia/Lspost11/Bayeux/bay_tama.html.

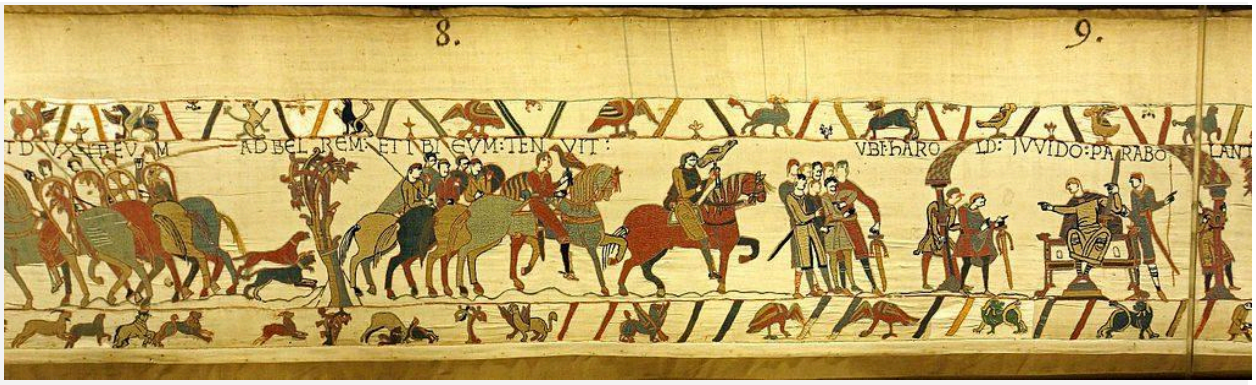

Fig. 4. Guy Taking Harold to Beaurain, Bayeux Tapestry, 11th Century, Dennis Jarvis, 23 June 2014, Licensed under Creative Commons Attribution – Share Alike Generic 2.0.

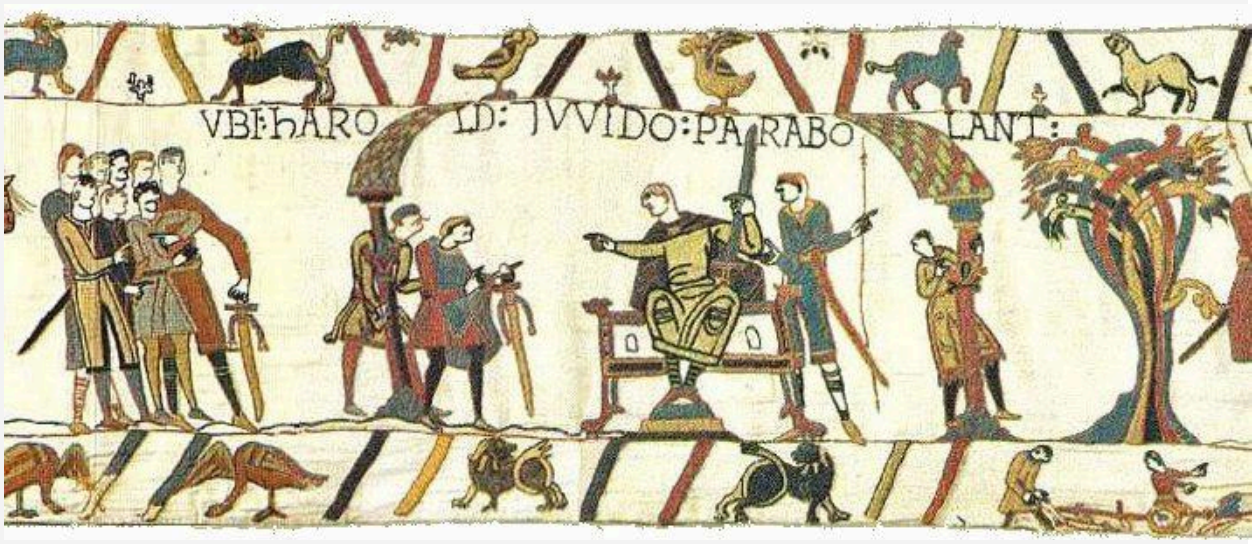

Fig. 5. Guy and Harold Negotiating Ransom, Bayeux Tapestry, 11th century, Courtesy of Creative Commons, ancientart podcast.org.

The first instance of this is the negotiation concerning ransom between Guy and Harold after the latter's capture (Fig. 5). While Guy sits commandingly on his throne, his sword upright and his right arm and hand extended and pointing in a speaking gesture, Harold approaches with hunched shoulders, holding his unbuckled sword and scabbard pointed down. The floor under his feet displays the bumpy silhouette continuous from the immediately preceding exterior scene in which Harold is escorted into Guy's presence. Harold and Guy's meeting takes place inside, however, as is indicated by the shingled, arched roof on columns that frames both men. And the floor under Guy is level.

The difference between the portrayal of Harold in this scene and his representation in the immediately preceding episode is striking and serves to highlight the function of the alternating ground line in this section of the embroidery. After Harold is captured by Guy, we see him being taken to Beaurain where presumably he and Guy will work out the terms of his ransom (Fig. 4). Guy, mounted on a stallion and holding a falcon in his left hand, follows Harold, also mounted and holding a falcon. Harold looks very much the proud noble as he does in the scene where he and his retainers leave Westminster for Bosham. In the later episode, Harold is isolated from the other clusters of figures, setting him apart visually so that he dominates the action. Indeed, he seems at least the equal of Guy, if not superior to him in status. Only a careful examination reveals that Guy is riding a stallion while Harold is on a mare, thus reducing the English noble's stature in this account.[7]

The representational contrast makes Harold's loss of power as he and Guy converse especially apparent. He has allowed himself to be captured, albeit involuntarily, and will be rescued by William. In doing so he has put himself in William's debt and set off the whole chain of events culminating in Harold's death and William's ascension to the English throne.

More puzzling is the alternation of the groundline within the Oath-taking episode (Fig. 3). Excepting the Coronation of Harold, it is perhaps this episode more than any other in the embroidery that points to Harold as the author of his own future troubles. This scene has long been recognized for its peculiarities. The setting seems to be in Bayeux, yet the medieval accounts of the Norman Conquest differ quite widely on this episode.[8] And Harold swears on not one but two reliquaries of different configurations. Again, the inscription is of little help since it simply indicates "Where Harold Swore a Sacred Oath to Duke William." In addition to the locale, the contents of that all-important oath remain unsaid.[9]

The groundline's form adds to the enigmatic nature of this episode. The setting is a domed, twin-towered, crenelated structure set on a stylized motte representing Bayeux that stands behind the enthroned William. We can make this surmise because the immediately preceding episode shows William, Harold and retinue riding to what the inscription identifies as this location. The motte hillside is represented by an arched opening that frames addorsed birds on a three-pronged perch who hold a floriated bar in their beaks.

In addition to the many oddities discussed in the literature on this scene, its composition creates confusion as to where exactly the action is taking place: inside or outside of the structure.[10] The presence of the two altars, one mobile but the other fixed, suggests an interior setting, but in other episodes figures are clearly located inside structures as are Guy and Harold when discussing ransom.[11] By contrast, in the Oath-Taking scene, William is enthroned next to the representation either of Bayeux Castle or the gates of the city.[12] The ground line further confuses the issue since it shifts its form in the middle of the scene without logical explanation. Under the representation of the building, William's figure and the two altars the ground line is level, yet beneath Harold it suddenly acquires a set of small, curved rises on which he perches precariously. This form of support is repeated beneath the two figures between the second altar and Harold's ship embarking for the return journey to England. In the latter instance it looks like rocky ground, which makes sense in the context of the episode, but is not so understandable under Harold. If he is outside then where is William, and if William is also outside why is his ground line level? In this example, the form of ground line reinforces the other visual

devices serving to underscore William's power and Harold's relative weakness: William's large, firmly enthroned figure with its upright sword and emphatic pointing left hand versus Harold's smaller, unarmed, spreadeagle figure standing on tiptoe while balancing between the two reliquaries. It is worth considering further the oscillation of the ground line in this episode to determine whether it has greater significance than a simple design choice, for there is the possibility that this feature might have more import than is immediately apparent.

While Harold's capture by Guy will ultimately put the English noble in William of Normandy's debt, it is in this scene that Harold seems to cement his vulnerability to the duke. The known primary sources scholars have used in discussing the Conquest differ in their accounts of this episode. In general, the Norman sources claim that Harold was sent by Edward the Confessor to confirm William's claim to the English throne and that he swore allegiance to the Norman ruler.[13] The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, however, records Edward's identification of Harold as his heir and makes no mention whatsoever of a promise to William or confirmation by Harold.[14]) By including a scene of Harold swearing an Oath to William within the narrative the embroidery appears to support the Norman perspective. The uneven ground beneath his figure recalls a similar precarious surface in the earlier encounter with Guy as once again Harold has placed himself under the power of another, potentially threatening, noble. He will later suffer dire consequences for doing so.

The third instance in which the alternation of the groundline points to Harold's culpability for his later downfall is the episode in which he returns to England and reports back to Edward the Confessor (Fig. 2). Prior to arriving at the Palace of Westminster he is seen on horseback, accompanied by a retainer, and pointing in the direction of his journey's goal. He rides a stallion with a prominent erection perhaps signifying a lust for power.[15] The next scene recalls the earlier encounter with Guy since Harold's attitude undergoes a remarkable transformation as he approaches Edward. He is on foot, as is his retainer, now following behind and holding a battle ax. Harold's shoulders are hunched, and his arms and hands extended toward the enthroned king, who points accusingly at the returning noble. Harold appears submissive as he and his follower traverse the undulating ground beneath their feet. By contrast Edward's throne is secure on the level floor. The inscription gives no clue as to what passes between the two men, but Harold's attitude suggests an awareness of his guilt, as does Edward's.

There are several other examples of the combination of level and undulating groundline within a scene in the embroidery. In many of these instances, the underlying function is to articulate power dynamics between the actors by locating

the more powerful figure on level ground, rendering him the more stable in the scene. Both uses, one pointing to Harold's culpability at crucial junctures and the other denoting relative status or character within a scene, is consistent with the embroidery designer's overall use of visual strategies to propel the narrative and articulate power imbalances. At least two of these strategies are standard indicators of status in much western European medieval art: size and location of figures. In the embroidery, one can see this approach at work in numerous scenes. For example, in the very first episode in which Edward the Confessor and Harold are shown in conversation (Fig. 1), the gigantic king looms over everyone else even though he is the only seated figure. Guy of Ponthieu is also the larger figure when he and Harold negotiate ransom, as is William in the Oath-taking episode. The same strategies also underlie William's discussion with the messengers (Scene 12), Edward's encounter with Harold after the latter's return to England (Fig. 2), Harold's Coronation (Scene 30), and William's discussion with his two half-brothers on the eve of the Battle of Hastings (Scene 44). In these latter instances the most important figure, be that William, Edward, or Harold, is singled out by one or more of these characteristics. Thus, relative size, centralization and elevation within a scene can work to indicate power and status in the textile's account. These apparently deliberate design decisions operate in several episodes in addition to the initial scene of the narrative and Guy and Harold's negotiations.

In addition to these familiar medieval techniques for visualizing status are others peculiar to this textile. Gale Owen-Crocker has pointed to the use of black thread to outline faces and hands in order to emphasize significant figures.[16] In the opening scene, for example, Edward's face and the right hands of both the king and Harold are outlined in black while the other figures are delineated in red (Fig. 1). This has the effect of calling attention to the king's figure and to the significant, if mysterious (to us) gesture between the two men. Similarly, according to Owen-Crocker, in the three brothers' discussion of the invasion Odo's face is outlined in black while the other two visages are in red in order to call greater attention to the bishop. That the design of the Bayeux Embroidery employs several different strategies, some common to the period and others exclusive to this work, to suggest something about a figure's character, status, motivations, and future lends credence to the theory that the form of ground line is also a motivated design feature, especially since I have noted that undulation is a deliberate introduction to the design.

It remains to ask if the embroidery's strategic use of the ground surface is the invention of the designer, or a strategy culled from other sources. It has long been accepted that specific iconographic motifs in the embroidery, as well as the use and form of trees and buildings to frame scenes and serve as stage sets, are derived from

certain manuscripts known to have been produced at or belonging to either Christ Church or St. Augustine's at Canterbury.[17] Can we detect in these manuscripts any such use of a ground line that might have inspired the embroidery's designer to do the same?

Fig. 6. Christ Adored by St. Dunstan, Oxford, Bodl. Lib., Auct. F. 4. 32. F. I.

Careful examination of tenth- and eleventh-century English manuscripts reveals frequent use of a jagged line as the support for a figure or scene, similar to that appearing in the embroidery.[18] In *Christ Adored by St. Dunstan* (Oxford, Bodl. Lib., Auct. F. 4. 32. F. I; Fig. 6), mid-tenth century, it effectively cuts off the gigantic Christ's

feet while at the same time surging up to support the kneeling figure of the saint.[19] A more robust version of the bumpy ground line undulates under the feet of Christ and his disciples in the *Incredulity of Thomas* from the Winchester *Benedictional of St. Ethelwold*, 971-84 (BL MS Add. 49598; Fig. 7).[20]

Fig. 7. The Incredulity of St. Thomas, Benedictional of St. Ethelwold, 971-84, BL MS Add. 49598.

A jagged ground line almost identical to that in the embroidery also supports the Crucifixion and the single image of the Holy Ghost in the Christ Church Canterbury Sherborne *Pontifical*, last quarter of the tenth century (Paris, Bibliothéque Nationale, MS lat. 943 Fig. 8).[21]

Fig. 8. The Holy Ghost, Sherborne Pontifical, Last quarter of the tenth century.

It is also a favored motif in multiple copies of Prudentius's *Psychomachia*, of the late tenth century (Cambridge, Corpus Christi College MS 23; London, British Library MS Cotton, Cleopatra C. VIII; Munich Staatsbibliothek CLM. 29031b; London, British Library, Add. 24199).[22] A jagged ground line is frequent in Junius 11, the Old English poems of the Old Testament attributed to Caedmon, dated c. 1000 [Oxford, Bodleian Library MS Junius 11 (S. C. 5123)], where it appears in scenes such as the Translation of Enoch, and the episodes devoted to the narratives of Adam and Eve.[23] It is also common in the British Library's copy of Aelfric's Pentateuch (British Library MS Cotton, Claudius, B. IV), a manuscript produced at St. Augustine's, Canterbury in the second quarter of the eleventh century.[24]

It has long been noted that these examples, among many others, drew inspiration for their style of representation and for their narrative strategies from the Utrecht Psalter, which arrived at Canterbury sometime before 1000.[25] This is evidenced of course by the three English copies of this famous Carolingian manuscript: the *Harley Psalter*; the *Eadwine Psalter*, and the *Anglo-Catalan Psalter*. The bumpy ground line is employed throughout this remarkable work, where its surging curves are more emphatic and provide a more pronounced landscape than in any of the early English manuscripts that betray its impact. This is also the case in the Bayeux Embroidery, for which the Canterbury production acts as an intermediary. What a survey of all these works also reveals is that none seem to employ the shifting ground line in the way it is used in the Bayeux Embroidery. In the manuscripts, when it appears it supports all alike without distinction as to status or moral virtue of a given figure. For example, when God condemns the serpent in Junius 11, both the deity and the reptile share a jagged, linear support. Likewise, in the British Library's copy of the *Pyschomachia*, the form of ground line is the same whether beneath a virtue or her corresponding vice. As its use in manuscripts suggests, the shifting ground line as a narrative strategy and signifier of status appears to be an invention of the embroidery's designer/s. While bumpy terrain is frequently figured in manuscripts associated with Canterbury and in the Utrecht Psalter, in none of these works does it serve to shape the narrative or designate power, status, or moral virtue.

The shifting ground line is not the only example in the embroidery of the imaginative use of less obvious details to comment on the main narrative. Keefer's analysis of the gendering of the numerous horses in the work concludes that there is no consistent association of stallions, mares, geldings, and even a mule with particular characters in the story. Instead, with the exception of William, who always rides a stallion, the gender of the animals shifts in accordance with power dynamics. She notes an early instance in the narrative when Guy of Ponthieu rides a stallion as he takes Harold prisoner but is on a mare when he hands the captive over to William.[26] Harold

himself rides a stallion as he heads to Bosham, a gelding when captured by Guy, and a mare as he and William ride to William's palace after the earl's rescue, while William rides a semi-tumescent stallion.[27] Keefer notes that the border imagery directly below this scene featuring a priapic nude man reaching out to a nude woman reinforces the meaning of the horses' gender coding. Stallions denote power, geldings and mares less so.

Conclusion

A close examination of the Bayeux Embroidery confirms the creativity of those who designed this remarkable object; the shifting ground line is one example among many of an imaginative approach to reinforcing or commenting on the textile's narrative and the characters and motivations of the actors within the story. Scholarly attention to the design and structure of the narrative reveals multiple subtle techniques for denoting character, propelling the action, and articulating power dynamics in especially significant scenes. Framing architecture and tree forms have both served to set the stage and to divide scenes. Emphatic gestures mark identities and motivations as well as keeping the story moving along. Border images comment on the main narrative as a form of parallel text as do the inscriptions. The gendering of horses tracks the changing power dynamics within the narrative. It is with this latter technique that the shifting ground line has the most similarity. It, too, marks the dominant figure within each vignette leading up to the invasion. Like the horses, it is not consistently associated with a single character in the story but alters to emphasize who is in control at a given moment.

The undulating groundline serves a larger purpose than as a signifier of power within an episode. At certain key moments in the narrative, it identifies the actor responsible for future carnage and his own defeat and death: Harold Godwinson. He teeters on the unstable surface as he twice puts himself at the mercy of someone more powerful and threatening, first Guy of Ponthieu and then Duke William himself. And at his second encounter with Edward the Confessor as he traverses the bumpy terrain, his hunched shoulders, outstretched arms, and shamefaced attitude signal Harold's recognition of his own culpability. Its use in the Bayeux Embroidery repurposes a common topographical feature in pre-Conquest English manuscripts, imbuing the landscape with narrative force. As such, it underscores the creativity at work in this remarkable textile.

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