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*Symbolism and Iconography of the Hawk in the Main Panel of
the Bayeux Tapestry*

Seminar paper

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SZEGED, 2001

The main panel of the Bayeux Tapestry features a large predatory bird carried by human figures on several occasions. More precisely, this predatory bird can be found in plates [2], [5], [10], [15] and [17], where the plates (scenes) are numbered according to *Stenton et al.*¹ Considering the fact that, apart from horses, very few animals are depicted in the main panel of the Tapestry, the repeated occurrence of this bird deserves closer attention. The aim of the present essay is to elaborate on the possible significance carried by the representation of this predatory bird from various points of view.

It seems rather obvious to think that the bird in question is either a falcon or a hawk, as these two birds are usually used in falconry and thus can naturally be depicted as sitting on someone's fist. For further classification, I shall turn to W Brunndon Yapp. Yapp observes that the wings of the bird in the Tapestry do not reach to the end of the tail, unlike those of a falcon. He also rules out the peregrine falcon, another species used by the wealthy for falconry, judging from the short tail and the absence of the moustachial stripe characteristic of that bird. Considering the fact that the wings stop near the base of the tail, Yapp arrives at the conclusion that the bird must be a hawk², so in the following I shall consistently refer to it as such.

In many books there appeared a suggestion that in mediaeval falconry different species of birds were attributed to different ranks in society, for example, a peregrine falcon was the correct bird for an earl. Yapp refers to Schegel and van Wulverhorst, who argue that Harold's being accompanied by such an 'inferior bird' as the hawk instead of the peregrine falcon that would suit his rank indicates the contempt that the Norman designer of the Tapestry felt for the English. Yapp rejects this notion, saying that this differentiation 'has no basis in fact and is unknown before the fifteenth century.'³

The Bayeux Tapestry is a pictorial narrative: apart from the Latin titles, all events, comments and allusions are translated into embroidered images. The chronological order of events, represented by the temporal sequence of words in a verbal narrative, turns into a spatial order of figures, usually arranged from left to right, when projected onto the two-dimensional world of the

Tapestry. What can be easily told in a written text or a spoken tale requires clever narrative devices to be displayed here. In this sense, the representation of the hawk as a narrative device in the Tapestry can be either factual or symbolic. By 'factual' I mean that the designer intended to represent it as physically being there, whereas I use the word 'symbolic' to denote that the hawk was only meant as a symbol, like the scenes from Aesop's fables in the borders. Either way, the fact that the hawk appears several times in several plates suggests that the designer must have used it to signify something important in the story he wanted to tell.

The first kind of factual interpretation that enters one's mind is that the hawk simply signifies hunting. This hypothesis is supported by the fact that in plate [2], where the hawk first appears, there are also hounds present, and together they make the impression that a hunt is in progress. However, the hawk also appears in plates [5], [10], [15] and [17], where the scene is set in Normandy. This observation would suggest that Harold went to Normandy to hunt, which is clearly in conflict with the historical sources available to us, namely, those of William of Jumièges, William of Poitiers and Eadmer of Canterbury. These reports identify the purpose of Harold's journey to Normandy as either to confirm Edward's promise concerning the English throne to William or to rescue a captured kinsman, but not as to hunt there. Consequently, it is unlikely that the hawk would appear in the Tapestry in order to indicate hunting in the strictly factual sense.

It would be unwise, however, to completely dismiss the connexion between the hawk and hunting. One should rather take it in a more metaphorical sense. Here I shall refer to David J Bernstein⁴, who interprets this hunting motif as a metaphor for Harold's grave situation in Normandy, with Harold as the quarry and both Guy and William as hunters. The hawk perched on the hands of Harold, Guy and finally William serves as the main signifier of the hunter-quarry metaphor. It is accompanied by several additional images referring to the same: the fettered birds in the upper border in plate [2], the fable of the lion's share with a goat, a lamb, an ox and a lion chasing and capturing a deer in the lower border in plates [9]-[10] and the Norman hunters in the lower registers of plates [14]-[15]. Bernstein also draws attention to the fact that these images do

not only appear along with Harold's imprisonment at Guy's but they also accompany the scene wherein William orders his men to liberate Harold. Moreover, as J Bard McNulty notes, the scene with the deer caught between two groups of dogs in the lower border of plates [14]-[15] very likely serves as an analogue to the position of Harold, for whom 'there is little to choose between being at the mercy of Guy or William.'⁵ This observation may be considered as an evidence for a possible English interpretation of events working in the background: an allusion that Harold's transferral from Guy to William did not really mean his liberation; it was only a typical case of 'out of the frying pan and into the fire.'

It might also seem reasonable to assume that the hawk was meant as a gift to Duke William, especially if one considers the fact that in plate [17] it has been transferred to him. Indeed, Bernstein lists this idea as one of the possible explanations of the presence of the hawk, and N P Brooks and H E Walker⁶ also favour this interpretation. The hawk can also be seen resting on Guy's wrist in plates [10] and [15]. In plate [10], the hawk turns to face Guy, opposite to the normal direction of events (from left to right). This inversion may have been used as a hint to something unnatural and might imply that Guy is an usurper, taking away a gift that belongs to someone else, or, in a broader context, having the audacity to capture William's would-be vassal. In plate [15], where Guy hands Harold over to William, the hawk has reverted to its normal position, which, with the same logic, might suggest that Guy has corrected his mistake.

Turning to potential symbolic interpretations, I shall first consult a mediaeval bestiary from the 12th century, relatively close to the supposed creation of the Tapestry. As the traits of a creature were associated with its name, it seems useful to note that this bestiary lists hawk under the name *accipiter*, a name it derives from the Latin phrase *a capiendo* [from seizing], saying that 'it is an avid bird at seizing upon others.'⁷ According to the bestiary, 'the Hawk is a bird which is even better equipped in its spirit than in its talons, for it shows very great courage in a very small body.'⁸ Thus we might say that the designer, aware of the above-mentioned connotations that accompanied this bird, placed a hawk on Harold's wrist in order to indicate both the relative

'smallness' (powerlessness) of its owner and his future audacity in breaking his oath to William and *seizing* the English throne. It would be very tempting indeed to arrive at such a conclusion; however, one should not forget that the hawk also appears on the fists of Guy (plates [10] and [15]) and William (plate [17]), which cannot be explained if one accepts this hypothesis.

There is no reason to think that universal human archetypes were not available to or known by the designer of the tapestry. To clarify the possible role of the hawk in this respect, I shall refer to Hoppál *et al.* According to them, hawk (along with predatory birds in general) symbolises power of divine or celestial origin⁹. Using this logic, the hawk resting on Harold's wrist can be regarded as another proof for English interpretation secretly woven into the Tapestry: Harold was not an usurper but a rightful heir to the throne. The hawk with Guy might be a hint to Harold's power being endangered; the fact that finally the hawk is transferred to William may reflect the English view that God granted the throne to William 'for the people's sins.'¹⁰

In the above, I have traced a number of potential interpretations of a predatory bird that appears in the Bayeux Tapestry several times. First, I used W B Yapp's observations to identify the bird as a hawk, then I elaborated on the possible meaning and significance of its presence in the Tapestry, be it either factual or symbolic. Following Yapp's arguments, I rejected the hypothesis that the species of the bird used in falconry would indicate the owner's rank. On the basis of available historical documents, I also found it unlikely that the hawk would refer to the act of hunting. The notion – based on the attributes associated with the hawk – that the bird would be a hint to Harold's daring in spite of his relative powerlessness, also proved to be contradictory thus I could not accept it. In the end, three interpretations remained that seemed plausible: the hawk may have been a gift to Duke William, or it may have signified the hunter-quarry motif reflecting Harold's situation in Normandy or it could have referred to the divine origin of Harold's short-lived reign. The latter two might exemplify a subversive English viewpoint hidden in the background. It was not my objective to decide upon any one of them; to arrive at an absolute conclusion is not even

possible because contemporary historical and iconographical sources are scarce at best and today's observers are restricted to tentative suggestions.

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¹ Sir Frank Stenton, ed, *The Bayeux Tapestry. A Comprehensive Survey* (London: Phaidon Press, 1957)

² W B Yapp, 'Animals in medieval art: The Bayeux Tapestry as an example,' *Journal of Medieval History* 13 (1987): 30.

³ Ibid, 30.

⁴ David J Bernstein, *The Mystery of the Bayeux Tapestry* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1986), 124-125.

⁵ J Bard McNulty, *The Narrative Art of the Bayeux Tapestry Master* (New York: AMS Press, 1989), 35.

⁶ N P Brooks and H E Walker, 'The Authority and Interpretation of the Bayeux Tapestry,' *Proceedings of the Battle Conference on Anglo-Norman Studies* 1 (1978): 4.

⁷ *The Bestiary. A Book of Beasts* (New York: Capricorn Books, 1960), 138.

⁸ Ibid, 138.

⁹ Hoppál Mihály et al, *Jelképtár* (Budapest: Helikon Kiadó, 1997), 180.

¹⁰ *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle D, 1066* as quoted in Sir Frank Stenton, ed, *The Bayeux Tapestry. A Comprehensive Survey* (London: Phaidon Press, 1957), 20.