

## THE FLAGS IN THE BAYEUX TAPESTRY

by Captain E. M. C. Barraclough

It is well known that the so called TAPESTRY OF BAYEUX or, as it is sometimes called, the TAPESTRY OF QUEEN MATILDE, is in fact an embroidery. It is generally accepted that it was made to the order of Bishop Odo, at Canterbury in England, where there was a famous school of needle-work, between the years 1170 and 1180.

Thus it is of great value as a contemporary record of the flags and banners of the English Army of King Harold II and that of the Normans under Duke William.

The majority of the flags depicted are what are known as "gonfanons" or war flags. The gonfanon was a simple form of flag, designed to fly from a lance, square in shape with a number of tails, generally 3 in number, but there are 2-shown with 5 tails and one with 4 tails (Fig. 1). The number of the tails does not seem to have had any special significance, as perhaps the most magnificent of all gonfanons has but 3 tails. 25 gonfanons are shown on the tapestry, 23 of them are in the Norman Army and only 2 carried by the English. Of the 23 Norman gonfanons 5 are of very simple design and are flying from the masts of the Norman ships; these are little more than wind vanes (Fig. 2).

This distribution lends colour to the view that the gonfanons were of Nordic origin. But where did the Norsemen find the gonfanons? It is difficult to imagine that they were an entirely local development without any influence from elsewhere. It must be remembered that the Norsemen were great voyagers; not only did they voyage West, discovering Iceland, Greenland and probably the continent of America, but they also travelled East, and took their long ships up the Dniepr River, even threatening Constantinople. They were known in Eastern Europe as the Varangians and later formed the Varangian Guard; Harald Harada, King of Norway, whom Harold II of England defeated at Stamford Bridge, only some 3 weeks before the Battle of Hastings, had served in this guard and was married to a Russian princess.

We know that during the 8th or 9th centuries small triangular standards were in use in Arabia and the Middle East, and we have evidence that Hassan and Hosein, grandsons of the Prophet Mahomet had triangular standards of this type (vide: Sarcenic Heraldry, by Harold Pereira, in The Coat of Arms, No. 62). It seems not

unreasonable to assume that the Norsemen got the idea of flag flying from vertical staffs from this source, and this seems particularly relevant when we come to consider the one flag in the Norman host that was not a gonfanon.

But, to return to the gonfanons, it is interesting to note that there are 6 which are decorated with the emblem of the cross, and one in particular is larger and more magnificent than all the others. This one is richly embroidered with jewels and ornaments, and is shown in the scene wherein William is raising his helmet to show that he is not wounded (Fig. 3). It is generally thought that this was the gonfanon that the Pope had blessed and presented to William. It is also interesting to note that the 6 gonfanons with a cross are all placed close to William. This number of crosses seems to give the expedition of the Normans something of the character of a crusade. But perhaps there is another explanation, which is that the designers of the tapestry wished to compliment Bishop Odo, their patron who had ordered the making of the tapestry.

Mention has been made of one flag in the Norman army that is not a gonfanon. It is semi-circular in shape, richly adorned and fringed and carries as an emblem a representation of a bird (Fig. 4). What is the significance of this flag? Is it supposed to be the Raven Flag of the Vikings, the flag that struck terror throughout the Western World? There are some who say that this is impossible, because the raven of the Vikings was a fierce and war like bird, whilst the bird in the tapestry looks tame and domesticated. We have no definite evidence as to the exact design of the Viking Raven Flag; it may well have differed on different expeditions. But perhaps 2 ancient Northumbrian coins of the 10th century give a clue. At this time Northumbria, a part of England, was largely under the domination of the Vikings. On one of these coins is a tri-angular flag, the upper side horizontal, and with a heavy fringe. The device appears to be a cross. On the other coin is depicted a stylised raven. It may well have been that one of the raven flags consisted of a flag of a tri-angular shape and charged with the stylised raven. The flag shown in the tapestry is not exactly like the one on the coin, but it is very similar, and it must be remembered that the artists responsible for the design and manufacture of the tapestry had for their information only the recollections of the participants, and the stories and romances that no doubt surrounded the campaign. Thus it cannot be expected that all the details are strictly accurate in all respects, and allowance must be made for this factor, and also perhaps for a certain amount of artistic license.

The position of this flag seems further to confirm that it was one of the principal flags of the Normans, for it is seen immediately behind William, and just in front of a gonfanon with a cross, in the scene which shows William setting

out for battle at the head of his knights. It is difficult to imagine, as has been suggested by some writers, that in this position it is the flag of Alan, the commander of the Third or Britanny Division of Duke William's Army. To me it seems that the weight of evidence points overwhelmingly to the fact that this flag was indeed the old and revered Raven Flag of the Vikings, which had been retained by their descendants the Normans.

Before we finally leave the Normans there is one more point of interest in the tapestry. The mast of the flagship of William, the "Mora" (Fig. 2), carries a device which has been described in the Roman de Rou as a lantern surmounted by a weather-vane:

" The Duke caused a lantern  
To be placed in his ship at the masthead  
So that the other ships might see it  
And hold their course near him.  
A gilded weather-vane  
Of copper it had raised on top "

(Roman de Rou)

Although described as a weather-vane it appears much more like a simple cross.

And now for the flags in the English Army of Harold. It has already been said that there were only 2 gonfanons in the English Army, and it is doubted whether in fact these two were genuine. There is a feeling that the artists responsible for the tapestry had said to themselves: "Oh the poor English, defeated and with not a single flag! Let us give them one or two more!" This is of course pure supposition, and the English may have had these two insignificant gonfanons.

It is known that Harold fought under, or rather between two banners (as recorded by William of Malmesbury) and one of these was Harold's "Dragon" seen twice, once in the hand of the standard bearer (Fig. 5), and the second time in the scene of the death of Harold lying on the ground. The other banner is shown, in the scene of the death of Harold's brothers Gyth and Leofine, lying on the ground (Fig. 6). This flag or banner was tri-angular in shape, very similar to the one on the Northumbrian coin mentioned above. Unfortunately in the tapestry the flag is shown without any emblem or decoration. However William of Malmesbury writes that Harold, who was fighting on foot, placed himself with his two brothers near his "vexillum", which was in the likeness of a man fighting and richly adorned with gold and precious stones. After the battle this flag was presented to the Pope by William. Probably the flag carried the figure of a fighting man, as it seems that this was the emblem of the Southern-Saxons, for cut in the chalk in the hills

above the old home of Earl Godwin (the father of Harold) is a gigantic man with a staff or lance in either hand.

The emblem of the dragon is always an intriguing one. Whence came this mythical beast, who at much the same time in the first days of the worlds history came to be the emblem of the Chinese in the extreme East, and the Welsh in the farthest West. The first mention of the dragon is in China in the year 2693 B. C. , but the first known picture of a dragon is dated about 200 A. D. We will never know what was the origin of the dragon, perhaps its ancestor was the serpent in the Garden of Eden.

---

P L A N C H E S

---

T A F E L N

---

P L A T E S

---

---

Report 2 : The flags in the Bayeux Tapestry

- Fig. 1      Examples of gonfanons
- Fig. 2      The MORA (flagship of William)
- Fig. 3      The gonfanon (blessed and presented  
by the Pope to Duke William)  
(William is raising his helmet)
- Fig. 4      Duke William leads his knights  
to battle, with the Raven (?) Flag
- Fig. 5      King Harold's dragon banner
- Fig. 6      Death of brothers of King Harold,  
with his triangular flag on the ground



Fig.1

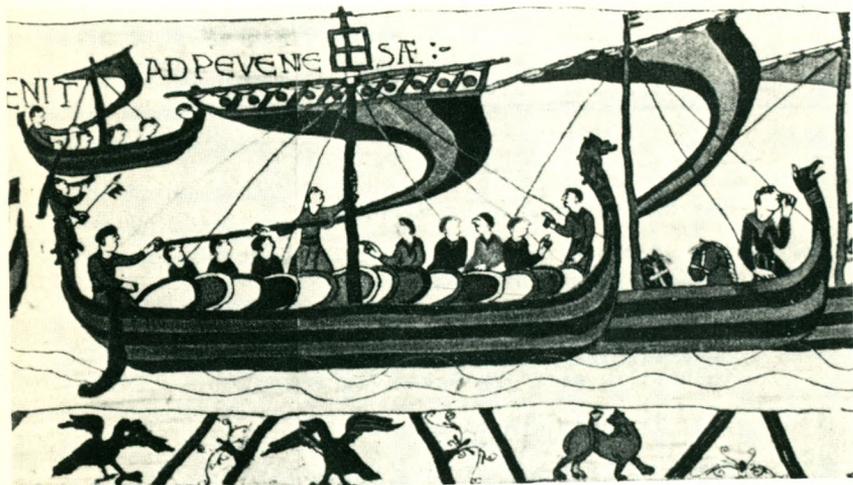


Fig.2



Fig. 3



Fig. 4



Fig. 5



Fig. 6