

O sege gif þu siehest

A 11th century star-spangled Anglo-Saxon war banner

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Persona Pentathlon Category 2: Needlework

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Summary

This is a battle-standard. The basic form is shown in many period illustrations, including the 11th cen. Bayeux tapestry. That these pennants could be gold-embroidered is suggested by literature (8th-10th cen poem *Beowulf*) and by historical accounts. Goldwork and embroidery materials and technique are based on the 9th cen. vestments of St. Cuthbert. The star design is based on an Anglo-Saxon depiction of Halley's Comet in the Bayeux tapestry.

A scan of the reverse of the work is in the Appendix.

Introduction

As an 11th century Anglo-Saxon thegn and man of arms, Wulfstan (the persona for this pentathlon) will need a small banner to fly as he heads into battle. There are no extant war banners from his period, so I consulted various sources to create my entry. That such a thing might exist, I source in *Beowulf* and some contemporary chronicles; for how it might look, I source in the Bayeux Tapestry, the Harley psalter, and the Franks Casket; and for how it might be made, I source in the St. Cuthbert vestments and the Maaseik embroideries.

Golden Standards in *Beowulf*

All excerpts from Seamus Heaney's facing page translation¹.

Describing a standard raised on a king's funeral ship, lines 47-49:

And they set a gold standard up (Tha gyt hi him asetton **segend gylden**
high above his head (heah ofer heafod

Not much detail here, just a flag or standard (segend) described as golden (gylden).

Describing the standard given by Hrothgar to Beowulf as a victory token, lines 1019-1022

Then Halfdane's son presented Beowulf
with a gold standard as a victory gift (**segen gylden** sigores to leane
an embroidered banner; also breast mail (**hroden hilde-cumbor**
and a helmet...

I checked the literal translations of some of these words, in addition to Heaney's poetic translation. "Hroden" in line 1020 means "adorned"²; "hilde" is war or combat³, and a "cumbor" is a banner or standard⁴. So we have a 'a golden standard, an adorned war-banner.' It suggests that the adornments to the standard are gold.

Describing a standard seen by Wiglaf in the dragon's hoard, lines 2767-2771

And he saw too a standard, entirely of gold (Swylce he siomian geseah **segn eall-gylden**
Hanging high over the hoard (heah ofer horde, **hond-wundra maest**,
a masterpiece of filigree; it glowed with light (gelocen **leoðo-cræftum**

This 'standard all-golden' is "hond-wundra maest," literally a "great hand-wonder"⁵, or something

marvelous made by hand. This seems to be what Heaney is rendering “filigree,” which suggests a complex interplay of thin elements – wires or threads. “leoðo-cræftum” in line 2768 means “skill of hand,”⁶ reinforcing this idea. So we have banners covered/adorned/ornamented with gold, made by hand.

It is not impossible that this could refer to some all-metal 'flag,' like the Söderala weathervane. However, among the mentions of historical banners, we do find mentions of embroidered textiles, and none of sheet metal.

Historical Golden Banners

Venerable Bede reports that the “king's banner of purple and gold” was hung over King Oswald's tomb c. 642.⁷

King Harold, gathering his army at Hasting in 1066, was said by William of Malmesbury (writing in c. 1125) to also have a golden banner:

The king [Harold] himself on foot, stood, with his brother, near the standard; in order that, while all shared equal danger, none might think of retreating. This standard William sent, after the victory, to the pope; it was sumptuously embroidered, with gold and precious stones, in the form of a man fighting.⁸

Harold's golden banner of a fighting man is also referenced by William of Poitiers, who served Duke William of Normandy as a priest, in his late 11th cen. *Gesta Guillelmi* (“History of William the Conqueror”):

Memorable quoque vexillum Heraldi, hominis armati imaginem intextam habens ex auro purissimo.⁹

Google Translate renders this:

It is a notable , too, the standard of the heralds, having armed men were embroidered with the image of pure gold, and of gold,

I assume it actually means something like “Memorable too was Harold's standard, having on it armed men embroidered in purest gold.”

I've interpreted this to be goldwork in the earliest *opus anglicanum* style, as represented in the 9th century vestments of St. Cuthbert. Details on the construction are in the “Making the Banner” section. I was only able to find surviving examples of *opus anglicanum* that came before or after the 11th century, but none dated to it. I used the earlier one as the more conservative approach.

It is probably worth noting that these historical golden banners are associated with kings, and two out of the three banners in *Beowulf* are as well. Wulfstan must have accomplished some great deed for the king to receive such a banner, or else be a very wealthy thegn indeed.

Battle Standards in the Bayeux Tapestry

A very typical form of early medieval standard is a square or rectangle, sometimes with one or more charges, and two or more pennants. They are not very large - somewhat bigger than a man's hand, in most cases.

These are usually showing sticking straight out from vertical spears. This may be an artistic convention,

but my re-creation comes close to achieving that stiffness.

I pulled some examples from The Bayeux Tapestry Digital Edition¹⁰. These two are held by the English at Hasting:

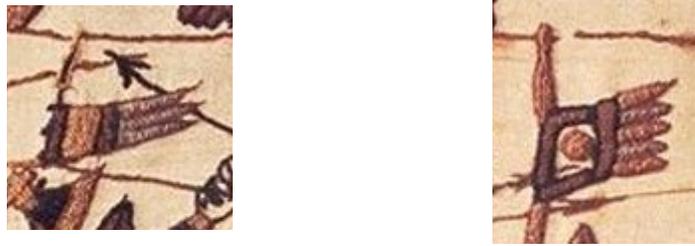


Figure 1: English banners in the Bayeux Tapestry

These are Norman banners. They are largely similar.

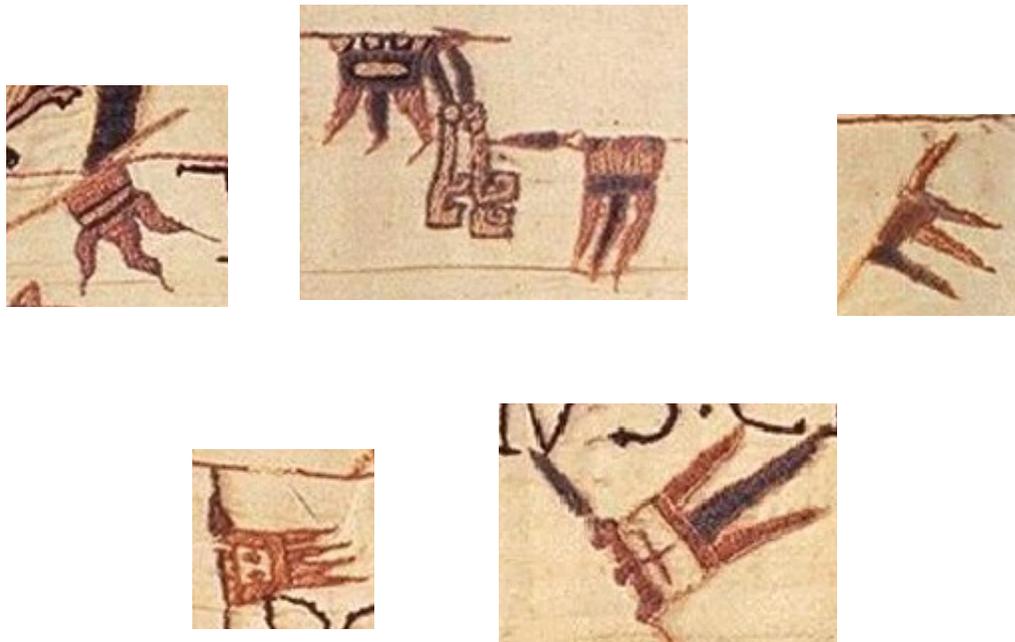


Figure 2: Some of the Norman banners in the Bayeux Tapestry

Three pennants per standard seems to be the most common. Some standards are solid, others have different colored bodies and pennants, and some have charges. They have a typical shape, but some are longer or more squat than others. The pennants are attached at various angles.

This one:

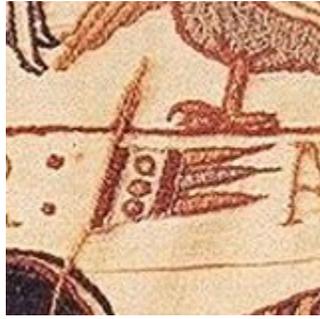


Figure 3: A Norman banner with three pellets

shows a row of three round charges with a border on two sides, and is closest in design to the one I've made.

Stars in Anglo-Saxon Art

I found only one true star in a quick search of Anglo-Saxon art - the star of Bethlehem, shown on the Franks Casket:



Figure 4: Adoration of the Magi, Franks Casket (image source: Wikipedia)

It is round, with thick rays that all reach equidistant from a round center. I thought about using this design directly, but without the context of the Bible scene, it looks more like a daisy than anything we'd recognize as a star.

There's a cheerful sun in the early 11th cen. Harley psalter. The sun is circular, with rays of about equal length radiating out. The rays wiggle.



Figure 5: Sun decorating Psalm 62/63 in the Harley Psalter (source: A Clerk of Oxford blog¹¹)

And there's the famous portrait of Halley's comet, a "wandering star", in the Bayeux Tapestry. It looks very much like the Harley sun, except for its tail.

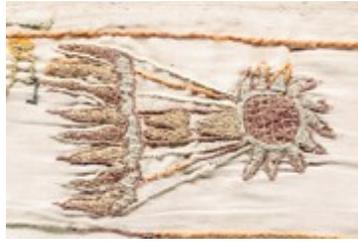


Figure 6: ISTIMIRANT STELLA (“wandering star”) in the Bayeux Tapesry (source: Wikimedia Commons)

Using these as my sources, I came up with this design:

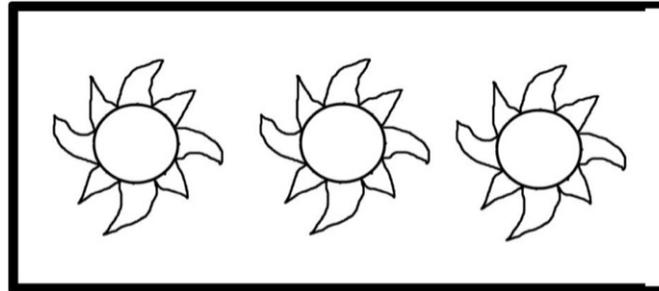


Figure 7: The design

Originally, I planned to work the stars and the background in gold, using colored silk for the black lines.

But during execution, it seemed that the stars would get lost in a gold-on-gold (“eall-gylden,” all-golden?) design, and I made the field colored and the border gold again. I also widened the border to more closely match the Bayeux examples of banners, and make the banner more “gylden.”

Making the Banner: Anglo-Saxon Embroidery

My banner’s ground is white linen. The Maaseik Embroideries, a 9th cen. Anglo-Saxon embroidery, is also done on linen⁹. Everything else I did is based on the St. Cuthbert vestments.

My source for the St. Cuthbert vestments is Jill Ivy’s book, *Embroideries at Durham Cathedral*.¹³ Table 1 summarizes the features of the 9th century vestments and how they are similar to my banner:

St Cuthbert Vestments	Star-Spangled Banner
Silk ground	Linen ground
Gold threads made of gold foil wrapped around red silk core	Gold threads made of synthetic (mylar?) wrapped around yellow mystery fiber core
Gold threads laid down at 128 per inch	A heck of a lot coarser than that
Gold threads surface couched with red silk	Gold threads surface couched with red silk
Haloes aside, couching done in “brickwork” pattern	Aimed for brickwork pattern, mostly hit it.
Embroidered figures on golden ground	Golden figures on embroidered ground
Embroidery fill done in split stitch in colored silks	Embroidery fill done in split stitch in red silk

Embroidered outlines of figures done with stem stitch	No embroidered outlines used
Gold threads seem to be mostly laid down in a back and forth pattern	Gold threads mostly laid down in spiral patterns. (Tried back and forth; thicker gold threads don't do it well.)
Edged with gold-brocaded tablet-woven trim	Not edged. Does have linen ties for attaching to spear shaft.
Lined with red silk	Backed with violet silk

Table 1: Comparing period technique to my technique

Construction Details

All the silk I had on-hand was very fine. I wanted something sturdy to support all the embroidery, so I went with linen. I also hoped it would achieve that “sticking straight out” effect, which it does.

My very first goldwork spiral, I didn't know to pull the ends of the thread to the back, so I trimmed them very close and couched them down. (You can see the yellow pouf of the core thread in the center of one of the stars.) The rest are all properly pulled through and secured on the back. (“Properly” by modern goldworking technique, anyway. Ivy is silent on how the gold threads are started and stopped on the vestments.)

I started the background fill carrying two silk threads in my needle. But that seemed too thin. Four strands looked too puffy and coarse, but three threads gave me consistently good coverage without being too bulky.

The silk backing was handsewn with backstitch, except for the top edge, which was overcast. Red silk thread was used. The linen ties are handsewn French seams, finished with overcast stitches in waxed linen thread.

Why ties? Why not a sleeve or socket?

Although they aren't apparent in the Bayeux Tapestry, I'd seen illustrations elsewhere that, to me, seemed to suggest ties. See for example Figure 8, which shows the banner carried by David as he faces Goliath in the Cotton Tiberius C VI., c. 1050 (so roughly contemporaneous with the Bayeux Tapestry). The banner is pulled back at three points, and loops of ink suggest a thin or light fastener, rather than a sleeve of fabric. My ties are perhaps too thick and ungainly; a medium-weight cordage, or a very thin tablet-woven band, may have been superior. I considered using silk as something with a more flexible hand, but was worried that it would be too “slick” and would allow the tied banner to slip down the pole. The linen ties seem to hold well.

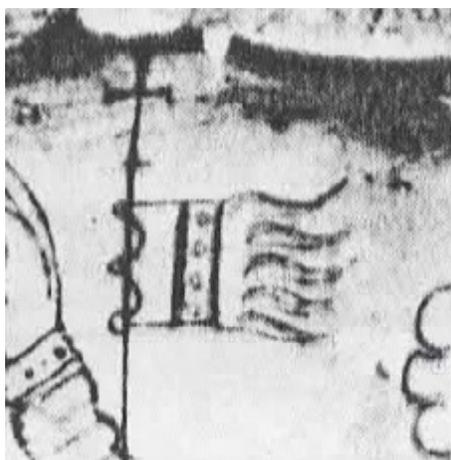


Figure 8: Cotton Tiberius C. VI, folio 8v., showing David's battle standard.

I picked silk as a backing material because it seemed luxurious and colorful. Unfortunately, it's much lighter weight than the linen, so the linen sort of pulls it around a bit.

A scan of the reverse of the work is in the Appendix, for those interested in that.

Conclusion

I'm very pleased with this item. I think it turned out quite well. If I were to do it again, I would likely:

- Plan an embroidered design on a golden ground
- Use a backing of similar weight to the front
- Use more slender ties

Resources

¹*Beowulf*. trans. Seamus Heaney. Norton & Co.: NY. 2000.

²*Beowulf*. ed. C.L. Wren. Biddles, Ltd: Surrey, UK, 1980, p. 251

³*Ibid.*, p. 248.

⁴*Ibid.*, p. 225.

⁵*Ibid.*, pp. 250, 259

⁶*Ibid.*, p. 255

⁷Venerable Bede. *A History of the English Church and People*. trans. Leo Shirley-Price. Penguin Books: Baltimore, 1968, p. 159.

⁸William of Malmesbury. *William of Malmesbury's Chronicle of the Kings of England*. trans John Sharpe, ed. J.A. Giles. Henry Bohn and Sons: London, 1865, p. 276. Accessed online at <https://archive.org/details/williamofmalmesb1847will>

⁹Guillaume de Poitiers. *Histoire de Guillaume le Conquerant*. ed. Raymonde Foreville, Paris, 1952, p. 224. Quoted in C. R. Dodwell, *Anglo-Saxon Art: A New Perspective*, Manchester University Press, Manchester, 1982, p. 247.

¹⁰Martin K. Foys. *The Bayeux Tapestry Digital Edition*. (CD) Scholarly Digital Editions, Leicester, UK, 2003.

¹¹A Clerk of Oxford. "Psalm Translations: O God, Thou Art My God." On A Clerk of Oxford blog.
<http://aclerkofoxford.blogspot.com/2013/03/psalm-translations-o-god-thou-art-my-god.html>

¹²Historical Needwork Resources. "Anglo-Saxon Embroidery."
http://medieval.webcon.net.au/loc_england_anglo_saxon.html

¹³Jill Ivy. *Embroideries at Durham Cathedral*. Robert Attey and Sons: Sunderland, England, 1992.