

Frontality: The Imperial Look from Christ the Pantocrator to
Napoleon Bonaparte

R. Howard Bloch

Yale University

I began to think about the question of frontality in front of the the scene of Harold's coronation as it figures in the Bayeux Tapestry, an embroidered account of the events leading up to the Norman Conquest of 1066 and of the Battle of Hastings itself sewn most probably in the decades following the event itself. Panel 73 contains the only image in the Tapestry's 230 feet of figures looking directly at the viewer. Archbishop Stigand faces forward in the emblematic pose of prayer such as can be found in works like an eleventh-century image of Saint Clement from the lower basilica of San Clemente in Rome [**Clemente**] or this image of Saint Appolinarius from the cathedral of Sant' Appolinare Nuovo, Ravenna [**aplorant**].

While the great majority of the Tapestry's 626 human figures are shown in strict profile with only half a face and one eye showing and a few are shown in some version of three-quarter view with a face partially averted, Harold upon the throne is shown frontally. Seated and crowned, Harold holds what is not quite a scepter, but a rod, or "virga," in one hand and an orb topped by a cross in the other; his feet, set at an

angle oblique to each other, rest upon a raised pedestal; his robe is draped in a "V damp fold"; the figure is contained, as in many of the Tapestry's interiors, by what seems like a constructed architectural frame.

The embroidered portrait of King Harold in majesty, in the tradition of the emperors of centuries past, puts him on a plane different from every other of the Tapestry's figures, which are in profile. The faces in profile, which include both horses and men, appear as if they were two-dimensional. In their alignment along the plane of action, the face and figure in profile are inscribed in time and move in the direction of history. They are oriented and point to a narrative climax at the Battle of Hastings. The same is true of the less frequent figures shown in three-quarter view whose two eyes we can see, though unlike Harold they do not look back. On the contrary, their eyes seem to be looking at some other person, object, or activity along the Tapestry's horizontal scenic plane. Taking only such faces nearest frontal Harold, what is surely the three-quarter Odo in panel 81 receives the order from William to construct the Norman fleet; the woodsman in panel 83 looks attentively at his coping ax; one of the three-quarter carpenters in the upper part of panel 84 appears to be handing something to his co-worker, while one of the carpenters in the lower portion of 84 works assiduously on the gunwales of a boat. The full face of Odo in the feasting just before battle in panel 112 casts its glance upon the others at table or the servants, but his visual field

does not penetrate beyond the bounds of the Tapestry. Unlike Harold in majesty, Odo does not look back.

In looking back at the viewer, Harold assumes the full measure of kingly power. The image of the frontal saint, Christ, or emperor shares in the uncanny visual phenomenon of painted or embroidered or sculpted eyes that are recognizable because they are full-face, eyes fixed upon and intended for the beholder and not engaged with other figures within a pictorial space. Frontal figures interacted with each other only in so far as they were placed in niches or on curved surfaces, when, in other words, they face each other in real space. Frontal eyes are aimed directly at the viewer, appear even to follow the viewer, who moves from side to side relative to the fixed portrait that we know to be unmoving and inanimate. The frontal eyes come alive, and what they see is no less than everything. They are all-seeing and omniscient in keeping with a depiction of imperial power as omnipotent. Harold in majesty is all-powerful because he is depicted as in the line of emperors and kings painted in this way and because no one and nothing escapes his gaze. Hieratic and saintly, Harold is for a brief moment in the Tapestry's long and tightly woven narrative outside of history and of time. Like the true ruler, he has only one role: to see and to be seen. In Byzantine art, the profile is the attitude appropriate to action, while the full face is appropriate to sacred representation. [Demus, Byzantine Mosaic Decoration, p. 8]. Harold's being, abstracted from becoming,

renders visually the assumption that things are as they seem and will always be as they are.

Harold in majesty gives the strongest indication of how the damaged Tapestry might have ended were it not in shreds in the aftermath of Harold's death and the flight of the English. If the Tapestry still possessed the seven feet thought to be missing at the end, there is little doubt that we would have seen an image of William in majesty to counterbalance that of Harold as the last in the line of omniscient and powerful imperial frontal faces. William's last look would have been the last word.

The full face is ancient, but it is not universal. In old Egyptian paintings the profile head is the rule for almost all figures, divine and human, exceptions being often fully frontal representations of the dead. As Meyer Shapiro notes, Greek vases sometime depict gods frontally; more often, however, the frontal regard depicts "an immobile, passive, or constrained person, one that is withdrawn from action. The full-face is also an attribute of the demonic, particularly of the Gorgons." Late Roman antiquity figured frontality as an attribute of worldly power as can be seen in this image from the Probianus ivory, ca. 400, with its full face figure seated on a throne and emphasis upon the folds of cloth lying across the lap of the *vicarius urbis Romae* so much like the V-damp folds of Anglo-Saxon representation and the Bayeux Tapestry. [**probianus**]; and, so like representations of the evangelists of only a few centuries later. And, of course, the frontal regard is

associated with the emperors of Byzantium, as in this famous mosaic of Justinian [**justinian**] or its conjugal twin, that of Theodora [**Theodora**].

Frontality takes on, of course, a religious valence and can be found in the frontespieces of sacramentaries, psalters, or lectionaries, as in this example of ancient Italian style known as the Evangile of St. Augustine (or St. **Cuthbert**) which shows St. Luke within constructed architectural framing. Front face of majesty also characterizes what is known as Ancient Irish style in, for example, another image of Luke from early 8th c., Gospels of St. Chad. [**chad**] or this ninth-century Luke from the Gospels of Mac Durnan [**lukestdurnan**]. There are many examples of Anglo-Saxon representations of Christ in full majesty: e.g., Psalter of King **Athelstan** from late 10th or 11th century, or this image from the Psalter of King **Canute** from the early 11th. I could not let pass this image from a work known as the Poem of **Caedmon**, which originated with Bede in the 7th c., supposedly translated by King Alfred in the 10th c., and which shows Patriarch Seth and his family. Note not only the bodily pose, but knotted ribbons of ringerike design on columns on the left and right, courtiers on right (5 legs, 7 men, you do the math), along w/ interlaced acanthus tree separating scene of majesty from more intimate scene of woman and child to the right.

Taking its cue from Byzantium, frontality is associated with an omniscient Christ, as in this mid-eleventh century mosaic from Hagia Sophia of Christ Pantocrator, all-ruling because all-seeing. [**pantocrator**]. Mosaics incorporated a moral

system according to which frontality was reserved for saints and full profiles for evil figures, Satan at the Temptation, Judas at the Last Supper and the Betrayal. As Otto Demus observes, the averted gaze of the morally abject "must not receive the venerating gaze of the beholder, and they themselves must not seem to be looking at him: iconographic theory and popular fear of the 'evil eye' go hand in hand...." [Otto Demus, Byzantine Mosaic Decoration, p. 8]. The sacred frontal and the profane profile is a distinction with a long tradition reaching to the High Middle Ages, and nowhere is it more dramatic than in the Cimabue (c. 1240-1302) betrayal of Christ in San Francesco of Assisi [**cimabue**]. But one does well also to ask, as Meyer Shapiro does, if the distinction doesn't break down somewhat in, say, Giotto's (1267-1337) depiction of Christ's betrayal (Padua). [**Giotto**] Even if we cannot picture the distinction between frontality and profile in absolutes, it is nonetheless a mark of spiritual distinction, as can be seen in this image of monks presenting the rule to Saint Benedict from the Eadui Psalter of the first decades of the eleventh century. [**Benedict**]

Frontality as an attribute of spiritual and imperial power from Rome and Byzantium belong to the Roman revival of the ninth and tenth centuries, with its admixture of Byzantine forms, among the Carolingians and Ottonians of the ninth and tenth centuries. In fact, the most obvious predecessors of frontal Harold, and the means by which earlier images of kingship passed to the Tapestry master, are the imperial Carolingian portraits such as a portrait from the year 846 of Charles the Bald,

grandson of Charlemagne, with scepter and orb with a cross painted upon it. The reign of Charlemagne, or the Carolingian Renaissance, is associated with the dream of Roman revival, and the ambition is preserved in the portraits of emperors long after Charlemagne's death in 814 and long after the dream of imperial unity had devolved into chaos. Carolingian representations of majesty such as that found in the evangeliary of **Lothaire**, grandson of Charlemagne, illumination from region of Tours done right around 850; or the Bible of his brother **Charles the Bald** from 846.

The Tapestry Master turned to Byzantine, Roman, and Ottonian imperial models in the representation of frontal Harold, and it is possible that the very idea of a scrolling monumental victory narrative arrived in England or France via the Ottonian heirs to Rome, whom the Normans, in a medieval version of manifest destiny, sought in their turn to replace. A potential route of transmission lies among the Germanic rulers to the East. Partisans still of Charlamagne's dream of restoring empire, the Ottonian emperors were frequent visitors to Rome. Sometime between 1015 and 1022, Saint Bernward of Hildesheim, who had lived with his pupil Otto III on the Aventine in Rome, ordered a twelve foot high Christian version of Trajan's Column. The eight spirals of Bernward's Column, representing the life of Jesus along with his triumphant entry into Jerusalem, still stands in the east choir of the Church of Saint Michael, Hildesheim. [**bernward**]

The Ottonian or Germanic emperors of the tenth century preserved the frontal system of representing sovereignty, as can be seen in a portrait of Otto II, with scepter and orb with cross in his hands and feet upon a pedestal, all contained within an artificially constructed architectural space, from the region of Trèves of around 985 [**Otto II**]; or in this manuscript illumination of Otto III, emperor from 983 to 1002, from Reichenau of 998 [**Otto III**]. The Bamberg Apocalypse, probably also made at Reichenau around 1001, shows the frontal Otto III with scepter and orb being crowned by Saints Peter and Paul [**bambergottoiii**]; but the same apocalypse shows that frontality can work simultaneously in both imperial and spiritual registers [**bamberg**]. It is amazing how tenacious the symbolic coronation and iconography of empire is: Charlemagne had himself crowned on Christmas day 800; William the Conqueror, on Christmas day 1066; Napoleon couldn't wait for Christmas, and had himself crowned Emperor of the French on December 2, 1804, as commemorated in Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres's portrait of Napoleon begun probably shortly after the event and completed in 1806 [**Ingres**]. This is not the Bourbon style portrait of Napoleon standing with the attributes of office--sceptre and hand of justice--in the mode of the portraits of French kings (Louis XIV-XVI), such as that painted by David [**David**], and others like Robert Lefèvre, François Gérard, or Guillaume Lethière. The painting is a reference to Charlemagne and to the medieval, Byzantine, and late Roman past. [**Ingres**] Napoleon is seated in the full majesty of the Ottonian emperors, holding what is believed to be

the sceptre of Charles V and another long rod known as the "hand of justice" that once belonged supposedly to Charlemagne. Charlemagne's sword rests under Napoleon's left hand; and, in the absence of the cruciform orb of the world, enlarged ivory globes decorate the top of the pilasters.

As part of the turn towards the medieval past after the Revolution, a turn documented by many of those sitting in this very room, Ingres consulted publications by early medievalists like Bernard de Montfaucon, who commissioned the first drawings of the Bayeux Tapestry, and the antiquarian and editor Comte de Caylus for images of Roman and Carolingian imperial imagery. Here is the image of Jupiter he found among the Comte de Caylus's engravings. [**caylus**] So too, Ingres could have known the work of the English draughtsman and sculptor John Flaxman, who died in 1826, or the engravings after Flaxman of Thomas Piroli, who died in 1724, both of whom associate frontality with the imperial attributes of the eagle and scepter and the all-mightiness of Jupiter. [**flaxman, flaxman2**] Ingres had traced an image of a seated Saint Louis and the image of a Byzantine ivory of an emperor seated on his throne. [**ingresbyz**]. Ingres's did a series of little sketches in preparation for the great imperial portrait of Napoleon: a drawing of symbolic objects like the hand of justice, and a sceptre that purportedly belonged to Dagobert. [**ingresobjs**] The little sketch he did (1806) of the scepter of Charles V appears not only in the imperial portrait of Napoleon I, but reappeared in the large oil

of Charles X in his coronation robes (1829). [**ingresceptre, charlesx**].

The association of Napoleon with Charlemagne functioned as long as the former was first consul. David's *Napoleon Crossing the Alps (1800)* [**saintbernard**] writes this association in stone via an inscription of the name KAROLUS MAGNUS alongside those of Hannibal and Napoleon in the very rocks on which Napoleon's horse rears its imperial head. Napoleon's coronation was full of references to Charlemagne: in the portrait statue of Charlemagne exhibited on the temporary porch erected across from the west facade of Notre Dame. The Napoleonic imperial seal (1804) had on one side Napoleon in majesty and on the other a "reconstruction of the Carolingian coat of arms." A seal commissioned in 1806 by the director of the Musée Napoléon, Baron Dominique Vivant Denon, shows superimposed profiles of Napoleon and Charlemagne. [**napchasmedal**]. The Napoleonic victory column on the Place Vendôme, in reference to those of Trajan and Marcus Aurelius, was originally to have been crowned not by Napoleon, but by Charlemagne. It was only after Austerlitz and Napoleon's victory over the Holy Roman Empire that Charlemagne was replaced by Napoleon as a Roman emperor.

Ingres's Napoleon transforms the Emperor into a religious icon. [**Ingres**] The painter Gérard, who saw the portrait because he occupied a neighboring studio, compared David's imperial Napoleon to the medieval statue of *Our Lady of Loreto*, which had been on view in an exhibit of Napoleon's war booty in the Cabinet des Médailles in Paris. [Rosenblum, p. 66]. Another

piece of war booty, the Jan and Hubert van Eyck *God the Father* from the Ghent Altarpiece, had been brought to the Musée Napoléon in Paris, and contemporaneous critics noted the resemblance between the archaic precision of Ingres's portrait and its fifteenth-century avatar. [**vaneyck**]

Ingres's portrait of Napoleon was almost rejected from the salon of 1806, and almost rejected for reasons of state cultural policy. Between the time he had conceived it, which could have been no later than 1804, and the time of its completion in 1806, the lines of official Napoleonic propaganda had shifted. In August 1806, Baron Dominique Vivant Denon, with the sting of the Emperor's recent rejection of David's imperial portrait, sent as an inspector to review Ingres's portrait of Napoleon none other than Jean-François-Léonor Mérimée, father of Prosper Mérimée, who recognized the originality of Ingres's talent, but who concluded: "Je ne pense pas que ce tableau puisse avoir aucun succès à la cour." It did not resemble the Emperor. Moreover, "L'auteur, en adoptant le type des Images de Charlemagne a voulu imiter jusqu'au style de cette époque de l'art. Quelques artistes qui admirent le style simple et grand de nos premiers peintres le loueront d'avoir osé faire un tableau du 14^{ème} siècle; les gens du monde le trouveront gothique et barbare."

[Henriette Bessis, "Ingres et le portrait de l'Empereur" *Archives de l'art français*, n.s., 24 (1969), pp. 89-90.]

Ingres's portrait was part of Salon of 1806 where it received the very kind of critique that Denon had anticipated: "gothic" rather than progressive, plus the Carolingian imagery was

considered to be too linked to the idea of an absolute ruler and not sufficiently in line with the post-Revolutionary idea of Napoleon as "a man of the people and soldier of the ranks." [Rosenblum, p. 70] One critic, Pierre Chaussard, claimed that, "M. Ingres ne tend à moins qu'à faire retrograder l'art de quatre siècles, à nous reporter à son enfance, à réssusciter la manière de Jean de Bruges" (Jan van Eyck)." [Pierre-Jean-Baptiste Chaussard, *Le Pausanias français: État des arts du dessin en France, à l'origine du XIXe siècle. Salon du 1806.* Paris, 1806, p. 177]. Another, Pierre Nolasque Bergeret, added to the polemic with the remark, "On se rappelle encore l'Empereur *mal-ingre.*" [*Lettres d'un artiste sur des arts en France*, p. 61]

Full frontal monarchy was not something from which the British in the post-Napoleonic era were immune, as we can see in this portrait of Queen Victoria in her coronation robes painted by Sir George Hayter, principal painter to the Queen, or in this sculpture in Kensington Gardens, which seems to reproduce the portrait. [**victoria**]

The rivalry of Normans and Anglo-Saxons smouldered for centuries and was rekindled in the nineteenth century after the Napoleonic wars via a return to the medieval past and in the form of medieval studies. If, in Marx's phrase, history is enacted first as tragedy, then as farce, why not a third rendering as philology? French national interest in the Middle Ages was matched by a revival of medievalism in England. If the French had their Roland, Charlemagne, and Joan of Arc, the

English had their legends of Arthur, Robin Hood, and King Alfred. The English and French fought each other intermittently between the middle of the eighteenth and the first decades of the nineteenth centuries, and genuine military encounters were often continued in the form of cultural warfare. [napoleoniii]

The free, good Anglo-Saxon and the enslaving Norman oppressor is a literary and historical theme sometimes put to surprising use on both sides of the English Channel. The French historian Augustin Thierry, under the influence of *Ivanhoe* and under the received notion that Norman-Saxon relations after the Conquest were the source of contemporary social difference, sided with the freedom-loving Saxons against the "Norman usurpers and imposers of feudalism" in what was a liberal and Republican attack upon the British ruling class. In the first volume of his *History of England*, focused upon the period subsequent to the reign of James II, Thomas Macaulay laments that the Conquest "gave up the whole population to the tyranny of the Norman race." Macaulay considers English history, dominated until the end of the twelfth century by kings born in France, to have begun in earnest only with the rebellion against King John and the signing of the Magna Carta of 1215, guaranteeing inalienable rights to the barons of England. In the second half of the nineteenth century, E. A. Freeman made the claim, which historians have echoed ever since, that Edward the Confessor, who had spent eighteen years in exile in France, brought back with him a preference for all things Norman and thus contaminated the "free Teutonic spirit" with "Norman vice."

The Normans or the French, Freeman believed, were Catholic, dishonest, and decadent and had disturbed the peace of Europe ever since. Curiously, this is exactly what French historian Jules Michelet thought of the English, which was not without its benefits. It was by hating England, Michelet believed, that France became France.

Though England and France were allies in the Crimean War (1854-1856), that enterprise ended finally in discord between the two. And when it came to the Franco-Prussian War of 1870-1871, many English liberals rejoiced at Prussia's victory over Napoleon Bonaparte's nephew Louis Napoleon, who had fled to London in 1840 after trying to topple the Orleanist monarchy and had returned as emperor in 1848. They saw in Prussia a fellow Germanic people with an enemy in common in the French. "The war on the part of Germany is, in truth, a vigorous setting forth of the historical truth that the Rhine is, and always has been, a German river," E. A. Freeman wrote.

As a Hanoverian, Queen Victoria shared in the Germanic tradition inimical to France. Victoria's mother was the sister of Leopold, Duke of Saxony, and her husband, Albert, was the son of the Duke of Saxe-Coburg-Gotha. All of their children married either Germans or Scandinavians. Victoria and Albert named their second son Alfred, and no monarch before or after Victoria participated more fully in the tradition of the most celebrated and steadfast Saxon king--Alfred.

With grave utterance and majestic mien

She with her eighteen summers filled the Throne

Where Alfred sate: a girl, withal a Queen,
Aloft, alone!

Thus the poet laureate Alfred Austin, in "England's Darling" read at the diamond jubilee celebration in 1897, commemorated Victoria's coronation. Though she died on January 22, 1901, Victoria's reign was to have culminated in millenary celebrations of Alfred's death in 901.

The return to Saxon roots was nowhere more evident than in the growth of Anglo-Saxon studies, which worked to establish a connection between the inhabitants of Britain before the Norman Conquest and the British Empire on which the sun never sets. Thomas Arnold, who became Regius Professor of Modern History at Oxford in 1841, just four years after Victoria's coronation, insisted that "we, this great English nation, whose race and language are now overrunning the earth from one end of it to the other,--we were born when the white horse of the Saxons had established his dominion from the Tweed to the Tamar.... So far our national identity extends, so far history is modern, for it treats of a life which was then, and is not yet extinguished."

The rivalry between England and France is written into almost all understandings of the Bayeux Tapestry from the time of its discovery until the present--that is, the attempt to determine when, where, by whom, for whom, and for what purpose it was made as a way of determining whether the first Anglo-Norman work of art is English or French.

I end with the suggestion that whether the Bayeux Tapestry is English or French is much more deeply rooted in the national rivalries of the nineteenth century, setting Germany and England against France, than in the reality of medieval perceptions and events. Extending the famous dictum of Carl Von Clausewitz's (1780-1831), according to which "war is a continuation of political relations by other means," to read "scholarship is a continuation of war by other means," we understand the attempt to locate the Tapestry's manufacture on one side of the English Channel or the other alongside the publication of founding epic works like *The Song of Roland*, the *Nibelungenlied*, and *Beowulf*, the rise of academic medieval studies, and the uses and abuses of popular literature connected to medieval legends in the complex building of nation-states. In a century which proclaimed the death of God, nationalism functioned as a staging ground for the passionate belief that once belonged to religion.

Bibliography