

A myth of Charlemagne?

One scholar has suggested that these may be knights of Christ. Could these be the emperors Constantine (4th c.), Heraclius, (c.575-641) or Charlemagne (742-814) fighting the Church's battle on earth? Both Heraclius and Charlemagne were often depicted with an eagle on their shields.

One legend of Charlemagne popular at the time of the painting told of his wars in Spain. One night his warriors put their lances in the ground. In the morning some of the lances had burst into flower. These belonged to those who would be martyred that day.

When Charlemagne was returning to France over the Pyrenees, his rearguard, in the charge of his nephew Roland, was massacred. Only when they had given their all did Roland sound his horn for help. If the knight with a horn, turning round on his horse, is Roland, Claverley provides us with the only medieval wall painting of the subject still in place.



Further reading

Christopher Barrett, 'Roland and Crusade Imagery in an English Royal Chapel' *The Antiquaries Journal*, 92 (2012), 129-68

John Newman and Nikolaus Pevsner, *Shropshire*, The Buildings of England series (2006)

D.C. Nicolle, *Arms and Armour of the Crusading Era 1050-1350*, I (1988), 352-3

Roger Rosewell, *Medieval Wall Paintings*, Shire Series (2015)

EW Tristram, *English Medieval Wall Painting: the Twelfth Century*, Oxford (1944), 48-9, 111-12

www.charlemagne-icon.ac.uk/exhibition/medieval-manuscripts/

Photographs by Jamie Carstairs



ENGLAND'S BAYEUX TAPESTRY



The wall paintings at All Saints Church, Claverley

Running for more than 15 metres along the north wall of Claverley Parish church, this extraordinary frieze of battling knights is the most prominent remaining feature of an extensive programme of wall paintings uncovered during restoration in 1902.

The frieze, the paintings in the spandrels below, and the more fragmentary paintings on other walls are all from the early 13th century. The paintings of saints above are from the 15th century. The heraldic painting on the south wall is even later.

What do they represent?

Perhaps it was the resemblance to the Bayeux Tapestry with its decorative border and strip cartoon style depiction of fighting that led early scholars to ask if they depicted a real event: perhaps even the battle of Hastings.



The theory which has dominated for the last 100 years has been that this was a religious allegory, representing the battle between the vices and virtues.

However, even those proposing this found it hard to distinguish which knights are meant to represent which virtues. The paintings may well have been open to several interpretations even when the scheme was complete. There may be representations of and allusions to a number of narratives and themes.



UNIFYING THEMES

Holy Cross

It is also possible to read here a narrative of the Holy Cross. It begins with the Tree of Mercy in Paradise (on the south wall); a branch of this was given to Adam's son Seth by an angel. This grew and became the source of the Cross of Christ.

Martyrdom

Roland and his companions were seen as martyrs, dying for the Christian cause in the fight to return Spain to Christianity.

The paintings in the spandrels below the frieze have often been considered to depict the martyrdom of St Margaret of Antioch.



Painter and technique

A fragment of similar painting survives at St Michael's Church at Upton Cressett, suggesting a local craftsman. Upton Cressett was held by a royal official who worked at Bridgnorth Castle.



The painter's technique is direct and reveals a high level of competence. A thin limewash on the stone walls was the only undercoat. Outlines were drawn with a brush in yellow ochre. Most pigments were bound by the lime water mixed with them. Features such as the angels' wings and the armour were painted in red ochre. Other colours are recorded: the white rider-less horse had green spots. The helmet and sword of the falling knight were bright green.

What prompted the paintings?

Claverley in the early thirteenth century was no ordinary parish church; it belonged to the Royal College of St Mary Magdalen in nearby Bridgnorth. The castle at Bridgnorth was an important royal stronghold and the home of the sheriff of Shropshire.

There could be a link to crusading propaganda, to drum up both support and money: churches often had large wooden chests to collect contributions for the crusades.