

## What's a Nice Medievalist Like You Doing in a Place Like This?

By Karen Green

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I get this question all the time: "How does a medieval historian end up collecting comics?"

I *love* this question. Not least because it posits an unlikely world, where a Venn diagram of the over-educated reader and the comics-reader create no overlapping set. (Um, have you met our president yet?) But more because it gives me the opportunity to become a massive, honking bore, riding one of my favorite hobbyhorses.

"Have you ever seen medieval stained glass windows? Or the sculptural program in a Gothic cathedral? Or a manuscript illumination? Or, you know, the Bayeux tapestry? The medieval world was constantly using artistic mediums to tell complex stories. *Blah blah blah blah blah....*"

Seriously: don't ask me this question.

But, since I've brought it up....

One could start even earlier. I've been known to start this rant with Lascaux, but I'll spare you that. But...have you ever been to Rome? Gone to the Forum? Passed by Trajan's column? In a continuous spiral rising along the outside of the column—talk about your infinite panel—is image after image, telling the story of the Roman Empire's two wars with Dacia (that's Romania, when it's at home). It begins at the base with a quiet scene of a couple of fortified buildings and continues through inventories of war-time spoils and legionaries building bridges; ships are loaded under Neptune's watchful eye, battles are joined, casualties are recorded, and victories are celebrated, in a sort of diorama of Roman military history. Of course, the average 1st-century A.D. Roman wasn't going to be able to "read" it, unless he fastened several balloons to his shoulders and floated up to the top of the column. But the intent of telling a story in a series of visuals is clear.



Let's move forward nearly a millennium: in 1025, at the Council of Arras, a statement had been issued: *Illiterati, quod per scripturam non possunt intueri, hoc per quaedam picturae lineamenta contemplantur*, or, "The illiterate contemplate things through the lines of a picture that they are unable to understand in writing"—a sentiment repeated almost verbatim by the renowned Abbot Suger of the abbey church of St-Denis outside Paris a century or so later. This statement encouraged—or perhaps merely acknowledged—an outpouring of visual narrative, in stained glass windows, in cathedrals' sculptural programs, in the capitals of columns, and ...



...in the Bayeux Tapestry for the making of which late 11th-century Kentish nuns sat patiently over an almost endless series of muslin strips, carefully embroidering the story of William the Conqueror's invasion of England in 1066. As Bryan Talbot has explained far better than could I, the sequences of the battle are separated in panels delimited by towers or trees. Above the main action is continuous caption narration, topped by an occasional upper border with random decorative elements; below are small, mundane, occasionally pornographic scenes of daily life that serve as counterpoint to the momentous events unfolding above them—scenes which anticipate the lower-register cartoons of newspaper comic strips such as George Herriman's *The Family Upstairs*. The events of the Norman invasion aren't necessarily rendered with perfect historical accuracy—although there's a nice rendering of Halley's comet, which did pass across the heavens in 1066—but that wasn't necessarily the goal anyway. It's a history written by the victors—though rendered by the conquered—and betrays the bias that, well, almost all historiography contains.



This kind of episodic, sequential, visual narrative occurs in a wide variety of medieval sources. Stained glass windows often present the same kind of viewability issues as does Trajan's column—so very high up! Sometimes the stories begin at the bottom and travel upwards, in a counter-intuitive progression akin to learning to read manga, as in the 12th-century windows depicting the life of Christ—a common subject for such visual stories—in the glorious Gothic cathedral of Chartres. Starting at the bottom left, with the Annunciation, and reading to the right in far-reaching stacks of color, the Gospel stories that were otherwise available only in Latin were laid out for all to follow. (If you click on that link for "12th-century windows" you can see a description of each individual panel, and put the story together for yourself.)

These sequential visual narratives weren't only for the illiterate, of course. On a recent visit to the Morgan Library for an exhibition of individual illuminated pages, I saw a leaf with the prefatory illumination from a 12th-century psalter, or collection of psalms. The similarity to a comic book page was striking:







This page also tells stories from the life of Christ. It's from a psalter that was 400 millimeters tall (nearly 16 inches), so was most likely used for a group of singers, such as monks, to crowd around—the pages with the words and music would have been visible from some distance. The psalter would very likely have stood open on a book stand, and this introductory image would have reminded its viewers of the story that inspired their devotion. (In later centuries, psalters such as this would shrink and become objects of private devotion for the very wealthy; those illuminations didn't come cheap.) Each scene is clearly defined—just as in the Chartres windows—with strong borders and, within the panels, architectural elements and designs such as the mandorla further delimit the space of a given scene. Within the panels, some things are exaggerated for visual effect, such as the outrageously large "withered hand" of the cripple Christ miraculously heals.



Really, all that's missing at this point are speech balloons, right? Well, I'm so glad you brought that up! In many late-medieval illuminations, scrolls (called *banderoles*) emanating either from the hand or the mouth of a given speaker display the words that person is saying. The odds are good that these words are going to be quotes from the Bible. One of the more common scenes employing this technique is that of the Annunciation, when the Archangel Gabriel appears to the Virgin Mary and informs her that she will be bearing a Very Special Son. He greets her, saying *Ave, Maria, gratia plena, Dominus tecum, benedicta tu in mulieribus*, or, *Hail, Mary, full of grace, may the Lord be with you, blessed are you among women*—or some combination of those words. Amazingly, Mary is generally depicted as glowing with serenity in such scenes, such as this one from a 15th-century French Book of Hours, as if angels bringing news of one's impending miraculous conception was no more startling than a visit from the postman.

But why should you believe me? Who the hell am I? I strongly suggest you listen to someone with far better comics cred than myself, and that's Paul Karasik, comics artist and comics scholar. On his blog, *Rules to Vivere By* (gotta love a guy who uses Latin that way), Karasik recently posted an entry about Giotto's fresco cycle in the Scrovegni Chapel in Padua. The blog post, *Reading the Picture Writing on the Wall II*, analyzes the structure of Giotto's early 14th-century frescoes depicting scenes from the life of Mary and of Christ, and he describes visiting the chapel as "walking into a comic strip. Actually it's like walking into three comic strips with each story cycle wrapping around the interior wall in three ascending tiers with the columns of the architecture separating the panels." I can't endorse Karasik's post strongly enough—it's a great piece of work. He discusses not only the structure of the whole, but the



visual layout of individual panels. My own favorite panel is the one depicting Judas accepting his 30 pieces of silver, payment for his promise to betray Jesus to the Roman authorities at that night's Seder. Giotto not only includes a pitch-black demon tugging Judas's arm, but renders Judas' halo—in his by right as one of Christ's disciples—in black, as befits someone who has tarnished his apostolic status. These are iconographic tropes that viewers would understand as intuitively as modern readers understand the Kirby krackle. Karasik believes—with good reason—that visual narratives such as Giotto's were not merely to instruct viewers in the Bible stories themselves, per the Council of Arras, but to instruct those viewers in how to feel about them. Not all are as successful at this as Giotto.





Of course, once you accept the notion that narratives in sequential art are common in the Middle Ages, you can't help seeing them everywhere. Visit the Cloisters, the Metropolitan Museum of Art's uptown branch devoted to medieval religious art, and on the lower level you'll find a 15th-century Flemish painting of St Augustine. Its "panels" are less clearly delimited—this is a more creatively-structured comic, perhaps, although two tall columns do help define the action—but its structure is obvious. In the center, Augustine is consecrated as bishop of Hippo, a town in northern Africa. Arrayed around this focal point are scenes from Augustine's life, which may be read top to bottom on each side. On the left, an earlier bishop of Hippo ordains Augustine as a priest; below that Augustine preaches while his mother, St Monica, tells her rosary. On the top right, above a second scene of Augustine preaching, the painter depicts a well-known anecdote from Augustine's life: the saint meets a mysterious boy digging in the sand, who tells him that understanding the nature of the Trinity is no more difficult than fitting the entire ocean into a hole in the sand—i.e., really freakin' difficult. Could that little boy have been....an angel?? Contemplate *that*.

So what's the point of all this? Other than pointing out that the tradition of telling stories via panels of images, with or without text, has a very long and distinguished lineage? Other than pointing out the underlying connections between medieval studies and comic books? Well, I'm not sure there needs to be a point. I mean, other than the one I made at the beginning—that on this topic, I am a MASSIVE BORE.

Images

Trajan's column, Rome: Trajan addressing his troops (left); Dacians attacking a Roman fort (right)

Bryan Talbot, *Alice in Sunderland*, p. 88

King Edward the Confessor to the left of Harold Godwinson, the leader of the English, riding with his knights to Bosham, first panel of the Bayeux Tapestry; Musée de Tapisserie de Bayeux

Life of Christ; Cathedral of Notre-Dame de Chartres, center lancet window on the west wall.

Life of Christ, and detail of Christ healing both the man with the withered hand & the demoniac, blind, and dumb; New York, J Pierpont Morgan Library, MS 521r

The Annunciation; Cambridge, Harvard University, Houghton Library MS Lat 133

Judas accepting the 30 pieces of silver; Giotto, Scrovegni Chapel, Padua.

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