Peter Thiel of Palantir's private viewing of the Bayeux Tapestry: Barbarians inside the gates

Paul Bond
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It is hard to conceive of a more degrading expression of the corrosion of culture under capitalism than the private viewing of the Bayeux Tapestry organised by the British Museum for billionaire Peter Thiel. The towering cultural achievements of human history are reduced to a day out for the financiers of fascism.

While up to 80,000 people queued for nine hours to buy tickets when the box office opened—with adult tickets costing £33 for a 40-minute viewing slot—the British Museum saw it as an opportunity to court oligarchs.

Believed to have been embroidered within decades of the battle, probably commissioned by William the Conqueror's half-brother Bishop Odo of Bayeux, the 70 metres (230 feet)-long depiction of the 1066 Norman conquest of Britain was likely made in England before being delivered to Bayeux. It has been shown at the Louvre in Paris twice but has not left France until now.

It is a work of profound historical and artistic importance. Its narrative of the Norman conquest, culminating in the Battle of Hastings, is vivid, dramatic and often harrowing in its imagery. Its extraordinary margins are filled with mythic creatures and astronomical phenomena. This is history as great art.

But its loan was regarded on both sides of the Channel as an exercise in "soft power," an occasion for the discussion of military and business relations between Britain and France. To further this, priority access was arranged for £1,000-a-night guests at the One Aldwych hotel. But this fawning before wealth and power was dwarfed by the laying on of a private viewing for Thiel.

The British Museum agreed with French conservators to monitor the combination of light intensity and exposure time to limit cumulative damage to the tapestry. This alone makes using this time to give exclusive priority access to Thiel revolting. But this is also a man with "no known interest" in the attraction or the institution.

Thiel embodies the fusion of big tech with the military-intelligence apparatus. He uses some of his vast riches from providing surveillance technology for repressive and authoritarian regimes to finance and cultivate far-right movements internationally.

An early supporter of Donald Trump, he wrote in 2009 that "I no longer believe that freedom and democracy are compatible." He backed Trump's attempt to overturn the 2020 election and has been a major supporter of vice president, J.D. Vance.

What is it of his cultural record that appeals to the British Museum?

As a philosophy student at Stanford University, Thiel was influenced by the reactionary and misanthropic thinking of René Girard, who argued that people borrow or copy desires from each other, thus becoming rivals for the same things, provoking violence and scapegoating.

A self-described "small-o orthodox Christian," Thiel drew from this a view of history heading towards Armageddon, heralded by the Antichrist. He has lately been giving invite-only lectures globally on the Antichrist at which attendees are forbidden to take notes. But reports made clear that Thiel once suggested the Antichrist might be Greta Thunberg and that the designation generally covers anything that suggests internationalism and social equality.

Along with Girard and religious thinkers, Thiel cites the Nazi jurist Carl Schmitt as having helped form the core of his beliefs.

Since his student days, he has acted as a recruiting agent for the right wing. At Stanford he launched a libertarian newspaper whose proteges include Jay Bhattacharya, propagandist for the murderous policy of mass infection during COVID.

Since 2017, his Thiel Capital has been cultivating a network of far-right academics at Cambridge University. The "Thiel network," was among the ringleaders of the witch-hunt that ended in the death of Professor Jason Arday.

James Orr, until last week Head of Policy at Nigel Farage's Reform UK, was appointed in 2019 as Associate Professor of Philosophy of Religion at Cambridge, reportedly accompanied by "a clandestine financial donation" from Thiel. *Byline Times* said documents indicated Orr had suggested the donation be kept anonymous, as he is also alleged to have done for Reform UK. Orr's lawyers said Thiel had requested anonymity.

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The far-right evangelist Orr hosted Thiel's Antichrist lectures in Cambridge this year, calling them "the highlight of our academic year." Perhaps Orr triggered Thiel's interest in the Bayeux tapestry when he called immigration "the most existential threat facing our nation since the Norman invasion."

Last year, Thiel and the CEO of his company Palantir UK, Louis Mosley, spoke alongside Reform UK's Nigel Farage at a rally of the far-right, libertarian Christian organisation Alliance for Responsible Citizenship. Praising "Elon [Musk]'s DOGE," Mosley spoke of "restoring our civilisation," with Palantir playing its part.

Current British Museum chair George Osborne was the Conservative Chancellor in David Cameron's austerity government.

A co-founder of PayPal and an early investor in Facebook, Thiel wallowed in the fiction that new tech entrepreneurs were "disruptive" innovators. But the reality was visible throughout, above all in the 2004 launch of Palantir Technologies.

Palantir was a CIA-backed startup, funded by its venture capital arm In-Q-Tel one year after the illegal invasion of Iraq. It has been a key component of US imperialism's repressive work internationally and domestically ever since, with clients including the CIA, NSA, FBI, Homeland Security and numerous police departments. Its current biggest US customer is the Department of Defense. Palantir this year reported 66 percent year-on-year revenue growth from government contracts, up to $570 million.

With the ruling class everywhere turning to authoritarian forms of rule, Thiel provides crucial mechanisms for mass surveillance. Documents released by Edward Snowden pointed to Palantir's involvement in the NSA's Prism surveillance programme.

Palantir's AI software has been used in the escalating war against Iran, as well as in ICE immigration raids in the US. Palantir CEO Alex Karp has called for a reversal of the post-war disarmament of Germany and Japan, describing national service as "a universal duty."

The Israeli Defence Forces use Palantir's AI-based targeting to facilitate the genocide in Gaza. Perhaps, in opening the doors of culture to Thiel, the British Museum had in mind the destruction of archaeological and heritage sites in Palestine and Iran his company has enabled.

In Britain, Palantir was awarded a £240 million Ministry of Defence (MoD) contract in 2025. The company also profited from the Boris Johnson government's criminal corporate handouts during the COVID pandemic to get a toehold in the National Health Service (NHS). Johnson and his strategic adviser Dominic Cummings reportedly met Thiel in 2019, but the government has rejected Freedom of Information requests for details.

Palantir built a COVID data store in 2020 without competitive tender, combining patient data with sources from operational data. When its initial three-month contract was made public, it emerged that tech firms were being given intellectual property rights to profit from access to NHS data.

Palantir may also have been allowed to use this data for training AI models. Questions remain over what the company is allowed to do with data "necessary to provide products or services." It is now two years into the seven-year £330 million NHS contract, with Palantir providing technology for its Federated Data Platform (FDP), aimed at improving efficiency by aggregating patient data. More than half the NHS trusts in England use the technology.

Thiel has said the NHS "makes people sick" and called for its privatisation.

Aware of mounting hostility to Palantir's access to patient information, Keir Starmer's Labour government mooted last year the possibility of exercising a break clause in the NHS contract, even as they renewed its MoD contract. Then Health Secretary Wes Streeting refused to act on the break clause. The Peter Mandelson protege is now Defence Secretary.

Palantir employed Mandelson's lobbying firm Global Counsel, which was soliciting Jeffrey Epstein's help with finding clients. Thiel remained in close touch with Epstein after his conviction on sex offences, with Epstein's Southern Trust Company investing $40 million in a venture fund co-founded by Thiel.

The phrase "Barbarians at the gates" has ancient usage, referring to the fall of the Roman Empire, and underwent revived popularity in the late 1980s—usually to describe the cutthroat world of financial speculation. As corruption seeped into every aspect of social and political life, the phrase was ever more frequently modified to speak of "Barbarians inside the gates".

Thiel is a true barbarian, an obscurantist arming repressive regimes, enabling spying on entire populations, financing emergent fascist tendencies and working against any progressive sentiment or movement. Those who consider him worthy of a private view of a great cultural masterpiece are barbarism's servants and facilitators.

Today, as the financial oligarchy and its governments plunge the world into savage austerity and war, the defense of humanity's highest artistic and cultural achievements depends upon the international working class sweeping the capitalist class from power and building socialism. That will in turn create the basis for monumental cultural accomplishments to stand alongside and dwarf all the glories of the past.

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