

Notes

A RE-APPRAISAL OF THE ICONOGRAPHY OF THE CHOIR SCREEN AT KING'S COLLEGE CHAPEL, CAMBRIDGE

THE choir screen in the Chapel of King's College, Cambridge was installed during the period of King Henry VIII's marriage to Anne Boleyn, and it has long been thought that it was commissioned to celebrate their marriage. However, a closer inspection of the carvings indicates that the screen may well have been intended to served a more serious political purpose; that is, to proclaim Henry's God-given right to absolute power in his realm and total authority over the Church in England, and to issue a warning to all those in opposition.

It is clear that much thought and expense went into the creation of the screen. Nikolaus Pevsner considered it to be 'the purest work in the Early Renaissance style in England [whose] quality is not excelled in any contemporary wood carving anywhere N[orth] of the Alps'.¹ The screen's carved surfaces display Henry and Anne's heraldic devices, with ciphers proclaiming their union,² interspersed with classical decorative motifs of armoury, fertility and harmony.³ There are however several noteworthy references to religion,⁴ and two other images

that stand out in particular. The first, placed on its own above the organ pipes, is a three-dimensional sculpture of a king holding a harp. The second, a prominently-placed panel depicts a dismembered head, strung up by its hair, its face distorted in agony. These two carvings are worthy of further attention.

It is not difficult to identify the harp-playing king as the Biblical theocrat King David. The head, often interpreted as that of a woman guilty of adultery, can more plausibly be seen as that of David's rebellious, luxuriantly-haired son Absalom.⁵ A contemporary viewer would have been familiar with this Old Testament story and known that Absalom's fate was due to his acting out of personal ambition, and against the Will of God. The use of this imagery fits well with Henry VIII's political philosophy. Since the early 1530s the example of the Old Testament kings of Israel had been used to justify Henry's break with Rome, and the *Collectanea satis copiosa* of 1534 cited David and Solomon to justify his absolute authority over the priesthood.⁶

Pamela Tudor-Craig has documented Henry's increasing empathy with King David, pointing out that in Coverdale's 1535 English translation of the Bible⁷ King David was depicted by Henry's side 'in the position of Royal Supporter in chief', whereas by 1539 in the Great Bible David has 'subsumed into Henry, the Lord's Anointed'.⁸ This concept is reinforced in Henry VIII's Psalter,⁹ commissioned in 1540, in which scenes of King David's life

¹ Nikolaus Pevsner, *The Buildings of England, Cambridgeshire* (Harmondsworth, 1954), BE10, 87.

² Eric Ives, *The Life and Death of Anne Boleyn* (Oxford, 2004), 243. See Ives' interpretation of this cipher with reference to a similar one in Anne's French psalter of 1529–32. The same cipher can be seen as a ceiling boss in the Gatehouse at Hampton Court.

³ For a detailed index of the screen's carved imagery see: <<http://lucychurchill.wordpress.com/2013/12/10/an-index-of-th...college-chapel/>>

⁴ (1) A high-relief depiction of God banishing sinners is an exception to the shields decorating the main tympana on the west face. Pevsner referred to this as 'the Descent of the Rebel Angels'. Pevsner, *The Buildings of England*, 88. (2) On the east side of the screen, flanked by numerous ciphers of Henry and Anne's initials and Tudor insignia, the rear of the Provost's Stall is richly decorated with high-relief carvings. God is depicted with his hand raised in benediction, and below him a soldier on a horse, most likely St George, overcomes a dragon. The stall contains other detailed images but it is not yet understood whether these make Biblical or

secular references. (3) Two roundels depict a monk wearing a cowl with a cabbage on his head. According to The Online Etymology Dictionary 'The comparison of a head of cabbage to the head of a person (usually disparaging to the latter) is at least as old as Old French *cabus* ('head of) cabbage (mid 15th C); nitwit, blockhead'. Moreover, the French *Robert Dictionary* shows 'caboche' as head, and then as a term for obstinacy. (4) Two inscriptions refer to God: 'Sola salus servire deo' ('Our only salvation is in serving God') and 'Dieu et Mon Droit' ('God and my right shall me defend').

⁵ 2 Samuel 14:25–26, 2 Samuel 15:1–6, 2 Samuel 18:9–15.

⁶ Richard Rex, *Henry and His Church*, <<http://gracewood0.tripod.com/henryrex.html>> accessed 3 April 2014.

⁷ Myles Coverdale, *The Bible* (William Tyndale and Myles Coverdale, 1535).

⁸ Pamela Tudor-Craig, 'Henry VIII and King David', in D. Williams, *Early Tudor England: proceedings of the 1987 Harlaxton Symposium* (Woodbridge 1989), 192–3.

⁹ Jean Mallard, *The Psalter of Henry VIII* (1540–1541), British Library, London, Royal MS 2 A XVI.

are enacted by Henry in full Tudor dress. The sculpture above the organ pipes fits with this merging of the two identities—the upper half of the sculpture is similar to Coverdale's King David, whereas the short tunic is more Tudor in appearance.

Whilst the references to King David in the screen are easy to understand, the gruesome depiction of Absalom is less so. The prominence of this image needs to be considered in the light of the political situation at the time; Henry's 1533 Act of Succession required all adults to accept his marriage to Catherine of Aragon as illegitimate and his marriage to Anne Boleyn as legitimate, or else to face life imprisonment. The Act of Supremacy of 1534 went further in stating that the king was 'the only Supreme Head in Earth of the Church of England' and, under the Treasons Act of that same year, it became an act of treason punishable by death not to acknowledge this. Catherine and her daughter Mary had become the focus of disenfranchised Catholics, creating the very real threat of

rebellion at home or a foreign invasion. Henry refused to back down, and in 1535 ordered the beheading of Bishop Fisher and his former friend and Chancellor Sir Thomas More for going against the Law of God by refusing to take the Oath of Supremacy.

Considering the carvings in this context it is reasonable to believe that the intention behind the screen went far beyond a celebration of the marriage of Henry VIII and his anointed queen Anne Boleyn, or even just a forthright proclamation of their omnipotent authority.¹⁰ The images of King David and Absalom suggest that by 1536 Henry was already identifying himself as the Biblical theocrat, in support of the notion that his will was indeed the Will of God.

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¹⁰ Henry and Anne's heraldic devices and ciphers are all presented beneath an Imperial Crown symbolizing their Divine Right to rule, and supremacy over the English Church.