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Heraldic Depictions of Royal Continuity

Peter N. Lindfield FSA

Honorary Research Fellow, History
Manchester Metropolitan University
p.lindfield@mmu.ac.uk

The Victoria and Albert Museum in London has within its collection an earthenware hot water cistern finished with a copper-green lead glaze that is thought to date to around 1530 (**Fig.1**).¹ It is decorated with the royal arms quartering France (modern) and England on a barbed Tudor shield typical of c.1500; this shield is encircled by the garter, crested by an imperial crown, and flanked by two supporters physically holding up the shield with a *banderole* that serves also as mantling. Beyond the confines of this royal achievement, the cistern's face is augmented with the Tudor rose, HR, ER, and a *fleur-de-lis* above the shield, *DIEU ET MON DROIT* beneath it, and flanked to either side by a vertical column of flowered grotesques. This is an incredibly rich and detailed accumulation of royal symbols expressing an identity that simultaneously looks back to the past—the garter is inscribed with *Honi soit qui mal y pense* in a historicizing Gothic script apropos to the Order's medieval origin—and also to the present with the motto and initials HR and ER in a Roman serif face, as well as the inclusion of grotesque ornament revealing knowledge of Pietro Torrigiano's tombs designed for Henry VII's mother, Margaret Beaufort, as well as that for Henry VII and Elizabeth of York, both of which were installed in the Henry VII Chapel, Westminster Abbey, in the first decades of the sixteenth century.² Revealing an awareness of the Italian Renaissance sculptor's work for the English court, this cistern clearly postdates 1511 with the commissioning of the earlier Beaufort Tomb. All of the motifs and inscriptions incorporated onto the face of the cistern are central to the visual identity of the English monarch; the question is, which monarch in particular?

An exhibition label for the cistern from the 1990s addressed this specifically. Uncommitted, it read that 'the initials [HR ER] may be those of Henry VII and his wife or of Henry VIII and his son'.³ The date of production perhaps sustains the suggestion that HR refers to Henry VIII, but for various reasons this does not appear to fit: the V&A subsequently revised its interpretation accordingly and instead claimed that HR and ER 'refer to Henry VII (1457–1509) and his wife, Elizabeth of York (1465–1503). Since the cistern almost certainly dates from the following reign, it seems that the initials were used to emphasise the continuity of the Tudor dynasty'.⁴ The heraldic forms employed in the decoration of this cistern raise a number of points crucial to understanding the presentation of dynastic heritage in the Tudor period, particularly at a time when the formal 'rules' governing heraldry that we know today, controlled in England and Wales by the College of Arms in London, and which were in effect during the early-modern period, were not formalised. The most important tradition not yet established at this time was the use of specific supporters to differentiate successive generations represented by the same shield. Upon succeeding his father, Henry VIII continued to use the most prominent and latter iteration of his arms featuring the red dragon and collared greyhound as supporters.⁵ Henry VII used of these arms widely and for the majority of his reign, and they can be seen illustrated in

¹ London, Victoria and Albert Museum, C.85-1933.

² Alan P. Darr, "The Sculptures of Torrigiano: The Westminster Abbey Tombs," *The Connoisseur* March (1979), pp. 177–84.

³ Victoria and Albert Museum, 'Cistern', (accessed 18/04/2021),

⁴ <https://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O57802/cistern-unknown/>.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵ Thomas Willement and William Pickering, *Regal Heraldry: The Armorial Insignia of The Kings and Queens of England, from Coeval Authorities*, (London: William Pickering, 1821), p. 67.

Royal 19 B XVI.⁶ By adopting his father’s achievement wholesale—quartered arms, supporters, and crest—Henry VIII maintained visual continuity with his father and his reign, and examples can be found on the chapel of King’s College, Cambridge, and in Royal 8 G VII.⁷ In the late 1520s, Henry VIII adopted a new pair of supporters: the crowned lion and red dragon.⁸ This actually reverted almost exactly to an earlier iteration of Henry VII’s arms, seen for example on a pair of side crests taken from the Henry VII and Elizabeth of York marriage bed and incorporated into a sideboard by George Shaw (1810–76) for Chetham’s Library in Manchester (Fig.2).⁹ The primary difference, however, between Henry VII’s early arms and his son’s later examples is the dexter supporter: Henry VII’s lion is *rampant guardant langued and armed*, whereas Henry VIII’s lion is additionally crowned.

The achievement on the glazed cistern thus clearly refers to Henry VII—the lion is not crowned—and so HR and ER signify Henry VII and his wife, Elizabeth of York. This cistern, nevertheless, was executed after the death of Henry VII in 1509 given the clear knowledge it demonstrates of Torrigiano’s royal tombs decorated with Renaissance-inspired grotesque ornament (Fig.3). Thus, the heraldic *schema* illustrates the clear and intentional reference to Henry VIII’s parents and thus his heritage. Curiously, however, the arms used to achieve this are not those typically associated with Henry VII—then as now—but, instead, are very specific and reference a very limited range of sources. Matching the form and appearance of the Royal achievements incorporated into the marriage bed of Henry VII and Elizabeth of York, including also the particular Tudor form of the barbed shields, this appears to demonstrate the bed’s importance to at least some fashioning of ancestral identity in the reign of Henry VIII. Further work exploring the significance and history of the bed is currently in preparation for publication.

Image Captions

Fig.1: Anon, *Cistern*, c.1520s–30s. C.85-1933. © Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

Fig.2: Anon, *Pair of Royal Shields from the Henry VII and Elizabeth of York Marriage Bed, now at Chetham’s Library, Manchester*. c.1486. © Peter N. Lindfield.

Fig.3: *Photograph of a Plaster Cast Taken from the Tomb of Henry VII and Elizabeth of York by Pietro Torrigiano in the Henry VII Chapel, Westminster Abbey, London*. 1872 (photographed). E.663:52-2016. © Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

⁶ London, The British Library, Royal 19 B XVI, f. 1v.

⁷ London, The British Library, Royal 8 G VII, f. 2v.

⁸ Thomas Woodcock and John Martin Robinson, *The Oxford Guide to Heraldry*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), p. 95, and Willemet and Pickering, *Regal Heraldry*, frontispiece, pp. 64–65.

⁹ See Jonathan Foyle and Peter N. Lindfield, “A Forger’s Folly?: George Shaw’s Productions for Chetham’s Library, Manchester,” *The British Art Journal* XXI, 3 (2020–21), [forthcoming](#).