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New Thoughts on the High Altar Canopy in the Henry VII Chapel

by

PETER N. LINDFIELD

The high altar in the Henry VII Chapel at Westminster Abbey was made originally by Pietro Torrigiano, an Italian Renaissance artist and sculptor, at the start of the sixteenth century. Torrigiano's work reflected his Italian heritage and the altar has been framed as 'a major masterpiece of the early Tudor Renaissance [...] surpassing even Torrigiani's [sic] royal tombs'.¹ The altar succumbed to the wrath of Puritan thought and it was dismantled a century-and-a-half after its erection. Various written and visual documents survive from the period to help understand the altar's original appearance and 'specification'. During the nineteenth century, fragments associated with the altar were discovered, and these, in turn, were used to construct a replacement; this was also taken down and another, commonly held to be an accurate recreation of Torrigiano's original, was installed subsequently in its place courtesy of the munificence of the Order of the Bath. This essay explores certain irregularities in the altar's twentieth-century reconstruction that vary from the original. It also presents and assesses the influence that an only recently rediscovered remnant from the time of Henry VII and Elizabeth of York—their marriage bed—had upon curious elements incorporated into Torrigiano's altar. As such, it advances a new, English source influencing at least part of the altar's design.



Fig.1
Current High Altar installed in the Henry VII
Chapel, Westminster Abbey, London (1935)
© Dean and Chapter of Westminster

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The current high altar installed in the Henry VII Chapel at Westminster Abbey (Fig.1) is a copy of the original early sixteenth-century example designed and made by Pietro Torrigiano (1472–1528). The altar was part of the Florentine sculptor's larger corpus produced in England: he designed and installed a significant range of monuments and sculptural decoration in the Henry VII Chapel, and he was also active working for the English Court producing works such as the portrait bust of Henry VII.² His high altar for the Abbey came to be considered excessively ornamental and opulent in the seventeenth century, and it was almost entirely destroyed in 1644 under the superintendence of the rigid puritan Sir Robert Harley (1579–1656); three fragments escaped destruction, and, having been discovered in the nineteenth century, they were used to create another altar towards the end of the century following the direction of Sir George Gilbert Scott (1811–78). This altar was also taken down and replaced subsequently in 1935 with the example that we see today: this twentieth-century altar also incorporates the Tudor fragments rediscovered in the nineteenth century, however, unlike Scott's work, the altar and canopy were intentionally fashioned to recreate Torrigiano's original.³

Some records retelling the original altar's destruction give a vivid account of its magnificent appearance and significance within the context of the Abbey's Lady Chapel: Bruno Ryves (1596–1677) wrote in 1646 that the Abbey was,

*so famous for it's [sic] Antiquitie, so admired for it's [sic] Elegancy of Structure, especially by the addition of Henry the seventh's Chappell, a Pile of that polished magnificence, Vt omnem Elegantiam in illo acervaiam dicas, as if Art and Bountie had conspired to rayse it to a wonder of the world.*⁴

And, in particular,

*Sir Robert Harlow, who breaking into Henry the seventh's Chappell, brake down the Altar-stone which stood before that goodly Monument of Henry the seventh; the stone was Touch-stone all of one piece, a Raritie not to be matched, that we know of, in any part of the world; there it stood for many years, not for use, but only for Ornament: yet it did not escape the frenzy of this mans ignorant zeal, for he brake it into shivers.*⁵

The antiquary Henry Keepe (1652–88) offered more detail about the altar and its production in his 1683 publication on the Abbey, *Monumenta Westmonasteriensia*:

At the head of his Grandfather King Henry VII. was Edward VI. K. of England, France, and Ireland, interred under a brazen Altar, artificially wrought, and gilt with Gold, of which there is nothing now remaining. He was Son to Henry VIII. By Jane Seymour his Queen, being crowned the twenty eighth of January 1546. and died the sixth of July 1553. (as it is supposed) of an untimely death. The Altar and Sepulchre, before mentioned, wherein the body of King Henry VII. resteth, was made and finished in the year 1519. by one Peter a Painter of Florence, for which he received no more than one thousand pounds sterling for the whole stuff and workmanship, so cheap and so excellent was work in those days.⁶

Whilst undoubtedly designed and made by Torrigiano, a manuscript in the Abbey's library records payment to another Italian artist, Benedetto da Rovezzano (1474–c.1554), in 1526 for 'setting up Our Lady's Altar in Our Lady Chapel at Westminster: £33 15s'.⁷ Torrigiano had already left England by this date, sometime around 1522, and so this relatively small payment, as Alan Darr has postulated, appears to indicate that da Rovezzano was paid to simply erect the altar: Torrigiano in comparison was paid the considerably larger sum of £1000 to design and cast it.⁸

Light is shed upon the altar, in particular its design, size, materials, colours, and heraldic augmentation, by the contract drawn up for its construction; an 'AGREEMENT between the EXECUTORS of KING HENRY the SEVENTH and PETER TORRYSANY [Pietro Torrigiano], respecting a MONUMENT, to be erected by the latter for that Monarch'.⁹ A transcript of this contract can be found in Appendix A of this essay. Details about the altar of relevance to this essay include that it should be based upon an unspecified pattern and that the canopy should be crested by a specific coat of arms on each of the cardinal faces. Surface patterns and colours are also identified. The contract reveals how the altar was a pivotal intermediary blending the contrasting medieval Gothic traditions of England and the modern, Classical ideas and designs found in the Italian Renaissance. It also raises several important points crucial to understanding not only the original altar's canopy—the primary focus of this essay—but also, when compared with historic visual and written records, that the 1935 reconstruction is far from an accurate recreation of Torrigiano's original. Finally, it helps connect the design and decorative augmentation of the altar canopy to a hitherto overlooked source only recently rediscovered.

UNDERSTANDING THE HIGH ALTAR CANOPY: CONTRACT, VISUAL RECORDS AND FRAGMENTS

The character and appearance of the executed high altar, as specified in the contract between Henry VII's executors and Torrigiano, is confirmed in a manuscript record of the structure written by William Cecil (1520–98), first Baron Burghley, in the 1570s:

At the hedd of the said Tombe standeth an aulter upon four pyllasters of white marbell and balesters of metle and gylte. The back of the said aulter both the sydes stories metle and gylte, two pilasters metle and gylte with either end of the said backe, four pillars bearinge the Roofe with petistales, vazes of metle and gylte and white marbell, the rofe also white marbell and gylte, the arms about the said Aulter white marbell and gylte and the west end of the garnishment about the Roofe is metle and gylte.¹⁰

Burghley recorded the presence of numerous coats of arms ranged 'about the Aulter'. Indeed, the contract, contrary to the altar's modern recreation, stipulated that four coats of arms should be installed upon the tester as follows: Henry VII's arms on the east and west elevations flanked by angels, and the arms of Henry VII and Elizabeth of York on the right (these arms were included on Torrigiano's tomb chest for the couple to the east of the altar (see Fig.13)), and England and Spain on the left.¹¹ This arrangement is far more complex than the 1935 reconstruction that instead only installed the Royal arms as depicted in a pair of engravings of the altar published before and a few

decades after its destruction. These engravings are a relatively naïve broadside illustration, *The Houses in Convocation in the Henry VIIIth Chapel*, from 1624 (Fig.2), and a more detailed rendition of the altar in Frances Sandford's *A Genealogical History of England and Monarchs of Great Britain &c.* (1683) (Fig.3). These plates share several characteristics: both present the altar's western elevation head-on looking east; the perspective from which they are taken is very low; of the four achievements on the canopy only the two western angels and the royal arms are depicted; the other two angels (included in the 1935 reconstruction) and the three sets of arms are obscured. Despite this, the parts of the altar depicted in these engravings confirm the canopy's decoration matched that specified in the contract.

Whilst visualising the contract's specification for the altar, there is a notable difference between the canopy friezes depicted on these two plates. The naïve broadside plate shows a plain frieze, whereas Sandford's engraving is far more detailed with *rinceau*-type vine ornament occupying this part of the entablature. The difference can perhaps be explained by the former perfunctory engraving being concerned with vaguely depicting the congregation of parliament in the Lady Chapel—the altar simply served as a backdrop much like the Chapel's apsidal terminus that is reduced from being one of the most spectacular examples of late-Perpendicular Gothic

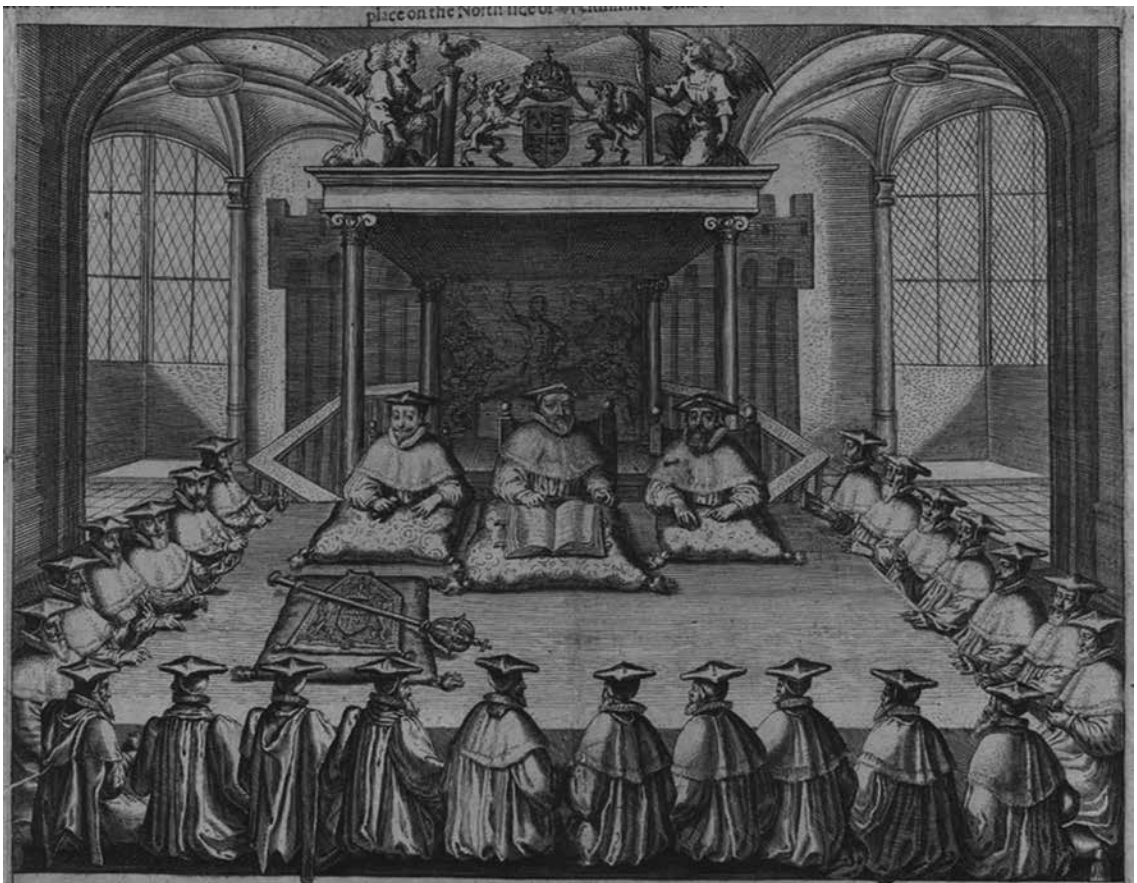


Fig.2
The Houses in Convocation in the Henry VIIIth Chapel (1624)
Image in the public domain



Fig.3
High Altar, in Frances Sandford, *A Genealogical
History of England and Monarchs of Great
Britain &c.* (1683)
Image in the public domain

architecture to crude simplicity. Sandford's plate, on the other hand, was a topographical study of the altar set within an antiquarian, historical publication: the depicted columns and capitals accord far more closely with Torrigiano's style seen elsewhere, including on the Henry VII and Elizabeth of York tomb (see Fig.13). This frieze, however, is quite different from that found on the altar today: the gently undulating *rinceau* with daisies and roses in Sandford's plate is certainly unlike the reconstructed frieze that features a tightly-woven *rinceau* with an alternating *fleur-de-lis* and rose pattern. We know, for example, that the altar was based upon 'THE PATREN',¹² but this 'pattern' or model produced to guide the altar's design is now lost and untraced.¹³ Darr does not address this clear contradiction between the friezes depicted in the engravings and that included in the reconstructed altar canopy; instead, he presents the 1935 altar as an 'accurate reconstruction [that] was based upon 16th and 17th-century engravings and descriptions of the original Altar of Henry VII'.¹⁴ This is clearly not the case: neither of the known visual records depicting the altar around the time of its destruction agrees on the frieze's appearance, and written descriptions of the

altar, including the contract, offer no further clarification.

So how can this reconstruction be considered 'accurate'? This deviation from the engraved records of the altar is based upon a fragment of 3 ft 8 in. (1.1176 m) discovered in 1866 by Arthur Penrhyn Stanley (1815–81), Dean of Westminster Abbey. Stanley unearthed this fragment where the original Tudor altar once stood at the entrance to Edward VI's vault in the Henry VII Chapel: this gave the fragment credibility as a precious survival from Torrigiano's work,¹⁵ and it was assumed—based on no further evidence—to be a piece from the altar's canopy frieze. A further two fragments of the altar were discovered subsequently by John Henry Middleton (1846–96), Director of the South Kensington Museum, in the collection of the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford. These white marble corner legs (or pilasters) were used to support the black altar table (Fig.4); they match the filigree grotesque ornament typical of Torrigiano and this decoration emerges from the portcullis: a Tudor badge. Sandford's plate depicts these legs and the portcullis, however the grotesques found on them are somewhat simplified compared with the rediscovered legs. This



Fig.4
One of the two white marble pilaster 'legs' discovered by John Henry Middleton at the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford, and subsequently incorporated into Scott's replacement altar for the Henry VII Chapel
By permission of Historic England



Fig.5
Postcard showing Sir George Gilbert Scott's nineteenth-century altar for the Henry VII Chapel
Author's collection

simplified depiction nevertheless still recalls the general detail of the legs; this reductive approach does not account for the difference between the frieze depicted on the same plate and the discovered fragment (the fragment's *fleur-de-lis* ornament is not simplified, but instead depicted entirely differently as flowers). Sir George Gilbert Scott used these pilaster-legs and the horizontal frieze to create an altar for the Henry VII Chapel at the time of Dean Stanley, but this altar (Fig.5) was quite unlike the original designed by Torrigiano and as depicted in the published plates (Figs 2 and 3). Indeed, it notably lacked a canopy. Stanley was nevertheless convinced that these three fragments were authentic salvage from Torrigiano's time: he wrote of 'the beautifully carved frieze of the lost altar, [which] together with other fragments of ruined altars which happened to be at hand for a like purpose'.¹⁶ Others were not so convinced. Doubt over the frieze's placement within the altar was raised at the time, and the antiquary Alfred Higgins recorded that,

after careful consideration, I have arrived at the conclusion that it was the base or rest for the Royal Arms (in marble) which we know, from the contract and from Sandford, surmounted the canopy. The length agrees almost exactly with the indication in the engraving; and although the height is nearly double the apparent height in the cut, the difference is accounted for by the simple fact that the rest for the arms was set back some way from the edge of the canopy and, therefore, half-hidden from view. The iron bar which was found with the piece of marble, as mentioned in the *Memorials of Westminster*, probably supported the arms from behind.¹⁷

Scott's altar was taken down and despite Higgins's reluctance to accept the horizontal fragment's original use as the canopy's frieze, it was nevertheless included in the 1935 recreation with its pattern copied and extended around the perimeter of the canopy in direct contrast to the pattern shown by Sandford.

Debate over the horizontal fragment's original location within the altar is part of a wider contradictory assessment of the 1935 restoration holding that the altar is simultaneously an accurate and inaccurate recreation of Torrigiano's original. In 1980 Darr wrote that whilst the altar,

is as accurate as possible in its measurements, it does not accurately present the variety of colour specified in the original contract. The angels and royal lion and dragon holding the Tudor crest [correction: shield] would most likely have been white (or perhaps polychromed), as the contract requires, rather than gilt as they presently are. The variegated white marble and gilt decoration on the cornice would have been more dominant.¹⁸

These discrepancies are also at odds with the supposedly informed, antiquarian basis to the 1935 reconstruction that was supervised by the Abbey's surveyor, Walter Tapper (1861–1935). Jocelyn Perkins recalled that the project was grounded upon the study of documentary sources, namely:

(1) [the] original contract made between Torrigiano and the executors of Henry VII; (2) a report as to the State of the Royal Tombs made to Lord Burleigh [or Burghley] in the reign of Elizabeth; (3) a curious early Stuart broadside, depicting a session of the Upper House of Convocation, which, in the years preceeding [*sic*] the Great Rebellion, was



Fig.6
East end of Clun Church, Shropshire showing the altar and canopy
By courtesy of the National Library of Wales, Aberystwyth

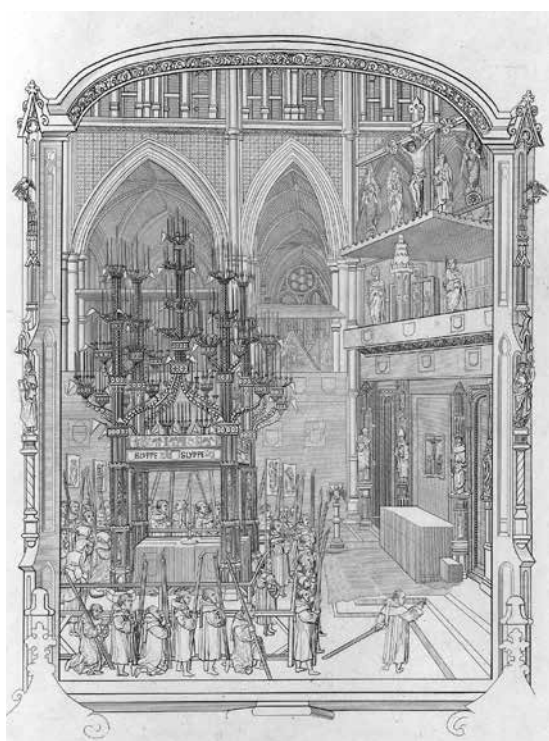


Fig.7
Detail of the Islip Funeral taken from the Islip Roll, *Vetusta Monumenta*, plate XVIII (1815)
Image in the public domain

went to assemble in the Chapel of Henry VIII; (4) an elaborate engraving, somewhat similar in character, which first appeared in the *Genealogical History of the Kings of England* by Frances Sandford and Lancaster Herald, the well-known antiquary; (5) the descriptions given by certain historians writing not long after the Great Rebellion when the circumstances with the demolition of the altar were still relatively fresh in the public mind.¹⁹

Despite consulting this broad range of sources, marshalled here too in this essay, there are numerous obvious aspects of the 1935 recreation that fail to match extant records of the original altar's form, appearance, and colour. The horizontal *rinceau* applied to the tester's frieze is one of these; new chivalric elements were incorporated into the canopy frieze further differentiating the design from Torrigiano's original. As a result, it is necessary to discount any reading of Torrigiano's altar by referring exclusively to its 1935 reconstruction; Sandford's published engraving of the altar and the original contract appear to be the most reliable sources to understand both his work and the fragments recovered in the nineteenth century.

AN ENGLISH SOURCE?

The most detailed discussion of the high altar was made in 1980 by Darr, and, as he concluded, 'its sources are disparate but mostly Italian'.²⁰ Indeed, he viewed the altar's canopy—a tester or *baldacchino*—exclusively within the tradition of altar canopies. Whereas a freestanding canopy ranged over an altar could be dated back to fourth-century Rome, he wrote,

in medieval England, however, a tester, or canopy suspended from or fastened to the ceiling, was frequently used in place of a *baldachino* [*sic*]. An example of an extant medieval English tester may be found over the altar at Clun Church, Shropshire, and in the Islip Roll of 1532 a tester is depicted above the Rood altar.²¹

The canopies at Clun (Fig.6) and as depicted on the Islip Roll (Fig.7) are not exactly like that over the Torrigiano altar. Indeed, agreeing with Francis Bond, Darr considered the Henry VII Chapel high altar canopy to be highly irregular in England: that of 'the baldachino [*sic*] proper, *i.e.* the dome of masonry resting on columns, we have no ancient example in England. The last was the baldachino [*sic*] with altar designed by Torrigiano [...] in Henry the Seventh's chapel, Westminster'.²² Whilst similar baldachins were uncommon in English church architecture when compared with Italy, placing canopies over beds was a well-established tradition in medieval England. Used to indicate honour and afford protection, these beds of state, also known colloquially as 'four-poster' beds today, can be seen illustrated in medieval manuscripts, such as MS M.948 from c.1525 at the Morgan in New York (Fig.8), and even in carved scenes, such as the anonymous sixteenth-century retable in the Musée Boucher de Perthes, Abbeville, France (Fig.9).²³

A particularly notable tester bed in medieval Westminster was the example commissioned for the January 1486 marriage of Henry VII and Elizabeth of York (Fig.10). The bed's tester, of which only the outer rails survive, was set on four posts carved with sharp-diamond-shaped



Fig.8
Bed of state, MS M.948, fol. 6r, The Morgan Library and Museum, New York
By courtesy of the Morgan Library



Fig.9
Bed of state in
16th-century retablo,
Musée Boucher de
Perthes, Abbeville
(colln no.1904)
By courtesy of the
Musée Boucher de
Perthes

diaper panels consistent with other work from the time, including: columns on the Henry VII Chapel choir-stalls; the corner piers of the screen around the tomb of Henry VII and Elizabeth of York; and the throne-posts depicted on gold sovereigns minted during Henry VII's reign.²⁴ The bed's headboard is also elaborately carved and depicts redemptive scenes as well as alchemical iconography blending red and white (relating to the roses of the houses of Lancaster and York). Rediscovered earlier this century having been removed from a hotel in Chester and put up for auction as a piece of Victorian cut-and-shut fakery, the bed, now in the Langley Collection in Northumberland, has been the subject of extensive art historical, historical, structural, and scientific analysis to understand its age and significance. Made from one source of European oak, save for later additions including a Stuart (pro-Jacobite) achievement placed over the top of the headboard in the eighteenth century, the bed was also painted in the Tudor period.²⁵ Later, this paint scheme was stripped and a thick Victorian varnish applied all over; the physical evidence attests to the bed's late medieval origin.²⁶ The marriage bed is the most significant piece of domestic royal furniture to have survived the Civil War;²⁷ precious few contemporary examples of domestic furniture—royal or otherwise—survive, which makes assessing its coherence with or differentiation from contemporary output difficult. We can, however, say with confidence that the bed was significant—the marriage of Henry VII and Elizabeth of York in 1486 united the previously warring houses of Lancaster and York—and the bed directly influenced the design of a number of beds made in Lancashire around 1500 for Thomas Stanley (1435–1504), first Earl of Derby, the Molyneux of Sefton Hall (discovered subsequently at Lovely Hall), and Adam de Hulton of Hulton Park.²⁸

Whilst appearing to be an abstract, unrelated pattern to guide the design of Torrigiano's altar for the Henry VII Chapel, there are several important parallels between the bed's canopy and that over the altar. Firstly, the frieze shown on the Sandford plate, decorated with a wave-shaped vine sprouting leaves and flowers (roses and daisies) alternately, is related to that found on the bed's headboard, footboard, and tester rails (Figs 11a and 11b). The bed's tester clearly could have served as a template for the altar's *baldacchino* simply by performing the same functions: protection and demarcation of status and honour. But given the apparently vague record of fine detail in the Sandford engraving, and that Sandford's plate clearly depicts a frieze unlike that discovered in the mid-nineteenth century, can the bed really be considered a direct source for the altar canopy? Despite the questionable detail of Sandford's plate, the bed and altar canopy share specific details incorporated into both seventeenth-century engravings and the contract. The bed and altar canopy display heraldic decoration at the centre of each face of the canopy, and, more significantly, the bed and canopy duplicate an unusual and early set of armorials used to represent Henry VII. Darr remarked upon this heraldry, recording that it was distinctively English:

the most English and the most unusual aspect of the Henry VII Altar is the crowned royal shield flanked by the royal Lion and Tudor Cadwallader dragon. Generally, a cross or figure of a Christ Child crowned an Italian Renaissance altar, and the heraldic arms were placed above a monument or tomb. Here, because the entire Henry VII Chapel represents a monument to the King, his royal arms crowned the altar (as the papal tiara glorifies Bernini's High Altar of St. Peters [*sic*] in Rome).²⁹



Fig.10
The Henry VII and
Elizabeth of York
Marriage Bed
(1485-86)
*By courtesy of the
Langley Collection*



Fig.11
Comparison of the rinceau pattern on the (a) Henry VII and Elizabeth of York bed and (b) the high altar canopy as published by Sandford (1683)

Crucially, however, the true significance, irregularity, and, ultimately, the source for this heraldic ornament was, and remains, overlooked. As we can see in both the broadside and Sandford engravings, the shield quarters France (modern), *three fleurs-de-lis*, and England, *three lions passant guardant in pale armed and langued*; this was adopted by the Plantagenet Henry IV, and it was used also and mostly by the Tudor monarchs. Two beasts are depicted flanking these arms on the altar canopy, and before heraldry had become sufficiently formalised for monarchs to adopt and maintain a consistent pair of supporters to differentiate themselves from their predecessors, there was a good deal of variation in these parts of heraldic achievements, even within each monarch's reign. For example, Henry VII used several different sets of supporters throughout his reign, including: *a dragon gules* and *greyhound argent collared gules*; *two greyhounds argent*; and *a lion or and dragon gules*. Despite this variation, Henry VII is overwhelmingly represented heraldically by the dragon and collared greyhound supporters flanking the royal quarterings;³⁰ a particularly good example of these arms can be found in Royal 19 B XVI (Fig.12). The same (typical) supporters can be seen on the western end of Henry VII's and Elizabeth of York's tomb chest depicted in Sandford's *Genealogical History*: the dexter supporter, a dragon, is depicted on the flag borne by the child to the left of the tomb chest's gartered royal arms (Fig.13). Indeed, until the late 1520s Henry VII's son, Henry VIII, continued to use his father's more typical achievement with undifferentiated supporters—*a dragon gules* and *greyhound argent collared gules*—and this can be seen incorporated into the decoration of the Chapel at King's College, Cambridge, and New Hall in Essex. Around 1528 Henry VIII adopted the *royal lion crowned or* and *dragon gules*;³¹ the crowned lion thus differentiated Henry VIII's arms from his father's rare and early use of the same supporters.

As depicted by the broadside and Sandford's engraving (Figs 2 and 3), the arms included on the altar's eastern and western elevations use Henry VII's early and unusual supporters (the dexter lion is not crowned). We must ask why were they used, and what model did Torrigiano follow to produce such a highly unusual heraldic achievement that, by the time of the altar's design and commission, had been replaced and thus outmoded? One of the most significant surviving examples of this achievement is incorporated into the Henry VII and Elizabeth of York marriage bed. This bed was described as having been made for their January 1486 wedding as 'a marriage bed and other suitable decorations [...] prepared'.³² It was also recorded in the wardrobe account by Alfred Cornburgh, along with 'i chair of state', as 'i great bed'.³³ Placed originally in the Painted Chamber,³⁴ directly opposite the Abbey in Westminster, it almost certainly remained close at hand when Torrigiano was designing and making the high altar for the Henry VII Chapel: there is no record of the bed having left Royal possession before this time, and a bed of exactly identical (and statistically unusual) dimensions was recorded in an inventory of Whitehall taken in 1542. Despite earlier thoughts that the bed had been moved to Lathom in Lancashire some time before 1500, it appears that the bed,³⁵ instead, remained in London for the time that Torrigiano was working on the Henry VII Chapel. A bed is recorded in the 1542 Whitehall inventory as number 455: 'oone bedstede gilt and painted with iiij of the planettes in the hed / and sondry other stories in the sides and fete being in length ij yerdes quarter and in bredith oone yerde iij quarters di / having Ceeler Tester';³⁶ the bed, once clear losses to size are taken into account, matches the dimensions of the bed exactly, and the few other beds of this size in the royal inventories do not



Fig.12
 Royal Arms, The British Library, London, Royal 19
 B XVI, fol. 1v
 By courtesy of the British Library Board



Fig.14
 Detail of the headboard of the Henry VII and
 Elizabeth of York Marriage Bed (1485-86)
 By courtesy of the Langley Collection

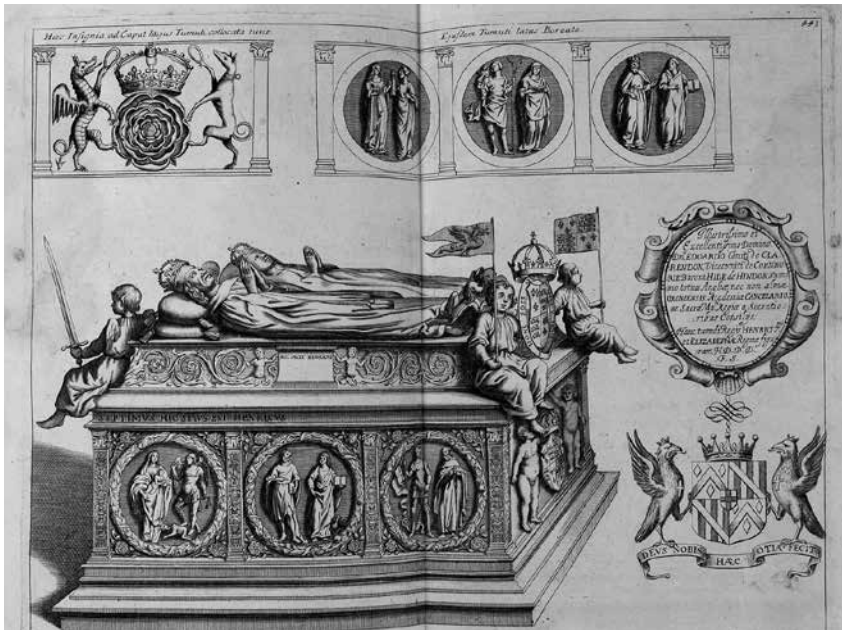


Fig.13
 Royal Arms, Frances Sandford, *A Genealogical History of England and Monarchs of Great Britain &c.* (1683)
 Image in the public domain



Fig.15

One of a Pair of Pillow Boards taken from the Henry VII and Elizabeth of York Marriage Bed displaying France (modern) (1485-86); Chetham's Library, Manchester
© Peter N. Lindfield



Fig.16

One of a Pair of Pillow Boards taken from the Henry VII and Elizabeth of York Marriage Bed displaying England (1485-86); Chetham's Library, Manchester
© Peter N. Lindfield



Fig.17

Detached Front Tester Cresting from the Henry VII and Elizabeth of York Marriage Bed displaying England (1485-86); St Chad's Library, Uppermill
© Peter N. Lindfield

feature a footboard; something that the materiality of the bed confirms was part of its design from the outset. The four ‘planettes’ mentioned in the inventory description can be understood to refer to the heraldic stars (estoiles) incorporated into the headboard and follow the term’s use from the fifteenth century onwards; and the ‘stories’, again according with sixteenth-century usage, refers to registers of decorative carving including the side panels or ‘pillow-boards’ (preserved at Chetham’s Library, Manchester), and the footboard.

This bed subsequently moved to Windsor Castle and can be found in the 1547 post-mortem inventory of Henry VIII as inventory number 13,149.³⁷ Crucially, the Henry VII and Elizabeth of York bed incorporates the King’s relatively rare arms that are found also on the high altar: whereas perfectly acceptable for when the marriage bed was designed and made, these arms were an unusual and anachronistic form that had been superseded when Torrigiano included it on the Henry VII Chapel’s high altar canopy. These supporters are included on the bed at the foot of the tree of temptation depicted on the headboard (Fig.14), admittedly not serving the role of supporters, they are instead youthful animals; they are, however, incorporated as supporters proper in a pair of pillow-board achievements, removed in the eighteenth century from the sides of the bed where the siderail and headboard posts intersect, and included subsequently in a c.1847 sideboard supplied by George Shaw of Uppermill, Saddleworth, to Chetham’s Library in Manchester (Figs 15 and 16). The irregularity of the arms’ supporters used on the marriage bed pillow boards and, in turn, the altar, can be gauged by Shaw using Henry VII’s more recognisable and ‘standard’ supporters—*a dragon gules* and *greyhound argent collared gules*—elsewhere on the sideboard when he was not using Tudor spolia.³⁸ Another parallel between the bed and high-altar can be found in the canopy, where the canopy rails decorated with shields are surrounded by scrolled decoration not too dissimilar to that specified in the contract quoted in Appendix A (Fig.17). Various decorative devices displayed prominently on the Henry VII and Elizabeth of York marriage bed appear to have directly informed both the form and design of the Henry VII Chapel high altar canopy, albeit translated through the Renaissance style of Torrigiano. It demonstrates the altar’s reference to a piece of furniture so significant in the history of Tudor England that reusing aspects of its iconographically rich and highly irregular, yet pertinent, heraldry, makes sense.

A similarly curious by-product of this mixture of Renaissance design and anachronistic arms to represent Henry VII and Elizabeth of York is a cistern now in the collection of the Victoria and Albert Museum in London (Fig.18).³⁹ Clearly indebted to the Renaissance decoration included by Torrigiano on the altar and, indeed, the tomb of Henry VII and Elizabeth of York, the shield’s shape matches the late-medieval ‘barbed’ style found on the marriage bed, and it similarly displays the rare lion and dragon supporters for Henry VII found on the altar canopy and the bed. Whilst undeniably from the turn of the sixteenth century, both cistern and high altar canopy demonstrate the continued relevance of the Henry VII marriage bed to the design and construction of royally important works at the turn of the sixteenth century that memorialise and celebrate Henry VIII’s parents.



Fig.18
Cistern (c.1520-30); C.85-1933
© Victoria and Albert Museum, London

APPENDIX 1

Extract from the contract between Henry VII's executors and Pietro Torrigiano concerning the high altar for the Henry VII Chapel; London, Westminster Abbey Library, 6638.

That is to say, the forsaied Petir covenanteth promyttith and graunteth and hym and hys Executors by these pntys byndith to make and work or doo to be made and wrought wele clenly workmanly curiously and substancyally ffoure basements of blake marble square of the gretenesse every square oon foote halfe — in length oon foote of assise and in the same he shall sett iiij other basements of white marble squared wyth levys and crests and upon the same iiij basements of white marble he shall set iiij pillours of copper gilt wrought with bases cuppes capitells and other garnysshmente and of heith gretenes and proporcyon according to the Worke and upon the same iiij pillours of copp. gilt he shall set a creste of copp. gilt round about the worke squared with portcullies and fflowerdelis and upon the same he shall make of White marble a vault w[ith] Archytraves and frese and creste with all [...] anships and colours thereunto belonging according as appereth by THE PATREN and upon the said crests he shall sett iiij Aungells of Erthe bakid in an oven after the colour of white marble evy of them kneeling of the heith of ij foote of assise ffrom the knes upwards of the whiche iiij Aungells oon shall holde the pillour w[ith] a cock upon the same all of copper gilt in the oon hand and the scourge of copp. gilt in the

other hand another Aungell shall holde the crosse of copp. gilt in oon hand and the iij nayles of copp. gilt in the other hande an othir Aungell shall holde the spere of copp. gilt in the oon hande and the hammer of copp. gilt in the othir hande and the iijth Aungell shall holde in oon hande a spere staff with a sponge on the ende of copp. gilt and in the other hand the pynsons of copp. gilt and upon the same crests upon the former parte and the hynder parte he shall make the Kings Armes of White marbyll coloured as app-teynith w[ith] the corwne Imp-rall ou- the same Armes of copp. and gilt and at the right ende the Armes of the late King and Quene in a scochyn of white marble w[ith] braunches and roses on either side of the same scochyn of white marble all coloured as appteynith and a crown Imprall of copp. gilt on the saide scochyn and at the other ende an other scochyn of white marble w[ith] the Armes of England and Spayne and a branche of roses of white marble ou- either side all coloured as appteynith wyth a crowne Imperyall of copp. gilt on the said scochin — And all the saide garnyssment shall conteyne from the nether parte of the said iij basements of blak marble unto the upper parts of the crests.

ENDNOTES

- 1 R. Strong, *Lost Treasures of Britain*, (London: Viking in Association with The Sunday Times, 1990), 101.
- 2 A.P. Darr, "The Sculptures of Torrigiano: The Westminster Abbey Tombs," *The Connoisseur* (March 1979), 177–84, C. Galvin and P. Lindley, 'Pietro Torrigiano's Portrait Bust of King Henry VII,' *The Burlington Magazine* 130, no. 1029 (1988), 892–902, and London, Victoria and Albert Museum, A.49-1935.
- 3 A receipt of payment to Thomas Gastaway by Sir Robert Harley of six shillings made 'for taking down the High Altar of Henry VII's Chapel' is dated 19 April 1644, and on 14 May 1644 to Peter Pettey for 'work done taking downe the Altar in Henry VII's Chapel'. See J. H. T. Perkins, *Westminster Abbey: The Chapel of King Henry VII and its High Altar*, (London: Westminster Abbey, 1935), 9, and Royal Commission on Historical Manuscripts, *The Manuscripts of His Grace the Duke of Portland, Preserved at Welbeck Abbey*, 10 vols, vol. 3, (London: HMSO, 1894), 132. See also E. Carpenter, *A House of Kings: The History of Westminster Abbey*, (London: Baker, 1966), 168.
- 4 B. Ryves, *Angliae Ruina, Or, Englands Ruine Represented in the Barbarous and Sacrilegious Outrages of the Sectaries of This Kingdome*, (S.l.: s.n., 1647), 236.
- 5 *Ibid.*, 238.
- 6 H. Keepe, *Monumenta Westmonasteriensia: Or An Historical Account of the Original, Increase, and Present State of St. Peter's or The Abby Church of Westminster*, (London: Printed for C. Wilkinson and T. Dring, 1682), 87–88.
- 7 London, Westminster Abbey Library, 30626.
- 8 A. P. Darr, *Pietro Torrigiano and his Sculpture for The Henry VII Chapel, Westminster Abbey* (Unpublished PhD New York University, 1980), 246, 262.
- 9 London, Westminster Abbey Library, 6638.
- 10 London, British Library, Lansdowne MS 116, fol. 13.
- 11 London, Westminster Abbey Library, 6638.
- 12 *Ibid.*
- 13 See Darr, *Pietro Torrigiano*, 244.
- 14 *Ibid.*, 240.
- 15 A. P. Stanley, *Historical Memorials of Westminster Abbey*, (London: Murray, 1886), 514–16.
- 16 *Ibid.*, 472–73.
- 17 A. Higgins, 'On the Work of Florentine Sculptors in England in the Early Part of the Sixteenth Century; with Special Reference to the Tombs of Cardinal Wolsey and King Henry VIII,' *Archaeological Journal* 51/1 (1894), 148.

- 18 Darr, *Pietro Torrigiano*, 243.
- 19 Perkins, *Westminster Abbey*, 6.
- 20 Darr, *Pietro Torrigiano*, 255.
- 21 *Ibid.*, 255–56.
- 22 F. Bond, *The Chancel of English Churches: The Altar, Reredos, Lenten Veil, Communion Table, Altar Rails, Houseling Cloth, Piscina, Credence, Sedilia, Aumbry, Sacrament House, Easter Sepulchre, Squint, etc.* (London: Humphrey Milford and Oxford University Press, 1916), 23, and Darr, *Pietro Torrigiano*, 256.
- 23 P. Eames, *Furniture in England, France and the Netherlands from the Twelfth to the Fifteenth Century*, (London: Furniture History Society, 1977), 73–93; New York, The Morgan Library & Museum, MS M.948, fol. 6r, and Abbeville, Musée Boucher de Perthes, colln no.1904.
- 24 London, British Museum, GHB.374.
- 25 See H. Hughes, *The Paradise Bed—Paint Analysis* (London: Historic Interiors Research & Conservation, 2013); A. Moir, *Dendrochronological Analysis of Oak Timbers from an Antique Bed Tree-Ring Services Report: Lfll/16/16*, (Mitcheldean, Gloucestershire: Tree-Ring Services, 2016).
- 26 One commentator has suggested the bed is a Victorian fake; it is impossible that a Victorian faker could have made this bed from one source of medieval oak and then applied different surface treatments, imitating medieval and later traditions, and, indeed, fooled a barrage of scientific testing (dendrochronology, wood DNA analysis, and paint analysis): A. Bowett, ‘Antiquarianism in Early Victorian Rochdale: The Trinity Chapel at St Chad’s,’ *Regional Furniture* 34 (2020), 160.
- 27 J. Foyle and P. N. Lindfield, ‘A Forger’s Folly?: George Shaw’s Productions for Chetham’s Library, Manchester,’ *The British Art Journal* XXI, 3 (2020–21), 42–50.
- 28 For the Stanley bed, see V. Chinnery, *Oak Furniture: The British Tradition: A History of Early Furniture in the British Isles and New England*, (Woodbridge: Antique Collectors’ Club, 1986), 3:454; and for the Sefton bed see H. Shaw and S. R. Meyrick, *Specimens of Ancient Furniture Drawn From Existing Authorities*, (London: William Pickering, 1836), pl. xxxvi, 39. The Hulton bed is now a bookcase at Chetham’s Library in Manchester: see A. Bowett, ‘The Great Chair of Sir Ralph Warburton, 1603,’ *Regional Furniture* 333 (2019), 117–18.
- 29 Darr, *Pietro Torrigiano*, 260.
- 30 H. S. London, ‘V.—The Greyhound as a Royal Beast,’ *Archaeologia* 97 (1959), 139–40.
- 31 London, The British Library, Royal 19 B XVI, fol. 1v. See T. Woodcock and J. M. Robinson, *The Oxford Guide to Heraldry*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 95.
- 32 B. André, *The Life of Henry VII*, trans. by D. Hobbins, (New York: Italica Press, 2011), 34.
- 33 W. Campbell (ed.), *Materials for a History of the Reign of Henry VII: From Original Documents Preserved in the Public Record Office*, 2, *Rerum Britannicarum Medii Aevi Scriptores*, 60 (London: Longman & Co., 1877), 174.
- 34 The bed aligns perfectly with the wall decoration of the Painted Chamber, and its placement within the room follows earlier examples of royal beds located within the room. See P. Binski, *The Painted Chamber at Westminster*, (London: Society of Antiquaries of London, 1986), 13–14, and C. Wilson, ‘A Monument to St Edward the Confessor: Henry III’s Great Chamber at Westminster and its Paintings,’ *Westminster Part II: The Art, Architecture and Archaeology of the Royal Abbey and Palace*, W. Rodwell and T. Tatton-Brown (eds), *The British Archaeological Association Conference Transactions*, XXXIX (London: Routledge, 2016), 152–61. For the bed’s placement within the Painted Chamber, see also J. Foyle, ‘The Fraudster Who Unwittingly Acquired Henry VII’s Marital Bed,’ *The Financial Times* (5 June 2015), <https://www.ft.com/content/c26ac356-046e-11e5-95ad-00144feabdco>.
- 35 See *ibid.*, and Foyle and Lindfield, ‘A Forger’s Folly?’, 43.
- 36 M. Hayward (ed.), *The 1542 Inventory of Whitehall: The Palace and Its Keeper*, (London: Illuminata Publishers for the Society of Antiquaries of London, 2004), 69.
- 37 P. Ward, *The Inventory of King Henry VIII: The Transcript*, D. Starkey (ed.), (London: Harvey Miller for The Society of Antiquaries of London, 1998), 317.
- 38 Foyle and Lindfield, ‘A Forger’s Folly?’, 47–49.
- 39 London, Victoria and Albert Museum, C.85–1933. See P. N. Lindfield, ‘Heraldic Depictions of Royal Continuity,’ *The Society for Court Studies International Quarterly Newsletter* (Spring 2021), 4–6.