A Winchester Cathedral Altar Piece of 1526 at Knole

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Few items of religious significance which were in Winchester Cathedral before the Reformation have survived because the building was stripped of its valuables at that time. However, we know from the inventory of 1535 that the Cathedral contained many gold, silver and other valuable objects, including crosses, images, candlesticks, plate, and much more (1).

This article describes a magnificent Altar Piece which used to adorn Winchester Cathedral albeit for as short a period as only nine years. It was made in 1526 and commissioned by John Avington, the SubPrior at the time, it now is to be found at Knole in Kent. It has previously been referred to in (Biddle2000) and (Croft-Murray1962).

**Description of the Altar Piece**

The Altar Piece consists of three separate panels, each 40 inches tall by 18 inches wide, with painted scenes of the Betrayal, the Resurrection and the Ascension of Christ on one side and grisaille images of three Anglo-Saxon Bishops of Winchester, Saint Hedda, Saint Æthelwold and Saint Birinus on the corresponding reverse sides. Details of the inscriptions on the painted panels are as follows:

**The Betrayal Panel** (see Figure 1) has the capital letters TT entwined on the stone beneath the feet of Judas.

**The Resurrection Panel** (see Figure 2) has a painted tablet in the bottom left hand corner with the following inscription, again in capital letters:

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AD DECOREM DOMVS
DEI IOH[ANN]ES AVY[N]GTON
DOCTOR ET SVPPRIOR
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This translates as: To the Beautification of the House of God, John Avyngton, Doctor and SubPrior, caused me to be made in the year of the Lord 1526 and in the 18th year of the reign of King Henry VIII.

**The Ascension Panel** (see Figure 3) again has the capital letters TT entwined on the stone beneath the feet of a kneeling Apostle. The letter style is identical to that in the Betrayal Panel.

The inscriptions at the bottom of the grisaille panels have a number of blanks, which are represented by _, and a number of errors, which are either original or as a result of subsequent restorations, as follows:

**The Birinus Panel** (see Figure 4) has the inscription SAINTVS · B_R__VS - this should be SANCTVS BIRINVS for Saint Birinus. The Bishop of Winchester from 634 to 650 when the seat was in Dorchester.

**The Æthelwold Panel** (see Figure 5) has the inscription SES · AO__SIWOIDVS - this should be S[AN]C[T]VS AETHELWOLDVS for Saint Æthelwold. The Bishop of Winchester from 963 to 984.

**The Hedda Panel** (see Figure 6) has the inscription SAINTVS · HEDDA - for Saint Hedda. The Bishop of Winchester from 670 to 676.

**What is Grisaille ?**

An article in (Britannica2009) describes Grisaille as:

*a painting technique by which an image is executed entirely in shades of grey and usually severely modelled to create the illusion of sculpture, especially relief. This aspect of grisaille was used particularly by the 15th-century Flemish painters (as in the outer wings of the van Eycks’ Ghent Altarpiece) and in the late 18th century to imitate classical sculpture in wall and ceiling decoration. Among glass painters, grisaille is the name of a grey, vitreous pigment used in the art of colouring glass for stained glass.*
French, grisaille has also come to mean any painting technique in which translucent oil colours are laid over a monotone under-painting.

Albrecht Durer depicts scenes of the Betrayal, the Resurrection, and the Ascension in his The Great and Lesser Passions of 1509-11 and other English painters also worked in grisaille in the 15th Century for example on the Eton College Chapel wall paintings.

**Who made the Altar Piece?**

The letters TT entwined on the Betrayal and the Ascension Panels are possibly the initials of the artist. However, Erna Auerbach lists no Tudor artists with the initials TT, see (Auerbach1954). However, a detailed artistic analysis of the panels might indicate that the artist was not English.

Biddle quotes Edward Croft-Murray, see pg325 in (Biddle2000) and pp30-31 in (Croft-Murray1962):

_“As Mr Croft-Murray demonstrated, there are two groups of paintings with actual Winchester connections: the altar-piece from Winchester Cathedral, now at Knole, and the paintings at Chichester and Amberley which he found to be by the Barnard brothers. Lambert Barnard’s patron, Bishop Robert Sherborne, was a Wykehamist and a friend of Bishop Fox of Winchester. The themes of the Chichester paintings and of the Winchester altar-piece are in striking conformity with that of the Round Table. All deal with subjects connected to British history.”_

**What is the Date of the Altar Piece?**

The Resurrection Panel has the regnal year HENRICI 8 18 and a calendar year 1526 in its inscription. The regnal year covers the period 22 April 1526 to 21 April 1527 and the calendar year, assuming that it started on Lady Day, covers the period 25 March 1526 to 24 March 1527. This means that the Altar Piece can be dated to between 22 April 1526 and 24 March 1527.

**Who Commissioned the Altar Piece?**

The date for the Altar Piece is when Richard Fox was the Bishop of Winchester and the names of the Prior and SubPrior of the Monastery of St Swithun at this time can be obtained from other surviving sources. Thus Henry Broke, who had been SubPrior since at least 17 February 1520 (2), was elected as Prior, following the death of Prior Thomas Silkstede, on 2 December 1524 (3) and John Avington was the Custos Operum on that date. John Avyngton was Chamberlain, in his second year on 29 September 1519 (5) and in his seventh year on 29 September 1524 (6). He overlapped as Custos Operum and he was in his first year on 29 September 1520 (7). John Avington was probably made SubPrior at the election of Henry Broke but records of his being in that office only survive from 4 August 1528 (7) and he was still in that post on 20 August 1539 (8). But by the time of the Surrender of the Monastery, less than three months later on 14 November 1539 (9), John Dean, as John Avyngton had now become known, was described as _doctor of divnyte and Reader of the same_.

The date of 1526 with John Avyngton as SubPrior on the Altar Piece is therefore in agreement with all of these other surviving sources. For more details on his life see (Braddock2008).

**Where was the Altar Piece originally Kept?**

The phrase Domus Dei or the House of God in the Resurrection Panel inscription refers either to a Church or Monastery or a Hospice or Hospital, see (Latham1965). Because the SubPrior of St Swithun’s Monastery commissioned it, the Altar Piece was most probably kept on or near one of the altars in Winchester Cathedral. The fact that both sides of the panels were painted could mean that the altar piece was placed so as to allow access to both sides. Two foundations called Domus Dei were in Portsmouth and Southampton respectively; see (Doubleday1973), which were hospices or hospitals. Therefore a possible location was the Infirmary of St Swithun’s. Though such a quality piece of art would be suited to a more prestigious location; perhaps even the High Altar.

**How did the Winchester Altar Piece come to be at Knole House?**

Knole house was built by Thomas Bourchier, Archbishop of Canterbury, between 1456 and 1486, on the site of an earlier house. On Bourchier’s death, the house was bequeathed to the See of Canterbury and in subsequent years it continued to be enlarged. It is sometimes called a calendar house, having 365 rooms, 52 staircases, 14 entrances and 7 courtyards.
Thomas Cranmer, Archbishop of Canterbury, visited Winchester along with Henry VIII as part of the Royal Progress in September 1535 and wrote to the King nearly a year later referring to their meeting there:

Pleaseth it your Grace to be advertised, that where as well by your Graces special letters, dated the iiijth day of June in the xxvjth yere of your Graces most noble reigne, as also by mouth in Winchester at Michaelmas last past.....

while in Winchester a number of precious items were known to have been ‘given’ to Henry VIII - namely:

On his arrival at Winchester, where he is now holding his court, this King had an inventory taken of the treasure in its cathedral church, and appropriated to himself certain very fine and rich ‘licornes,’ besides a large gold cross set with precious stones.

It is possible that the Prior and Convent gave the Altar Piece to Thomas Cranmer during his visit as a gift. Cranmer could have kept it at Knole and when the house was granted to Henry VIII by indenture on 30 November 1537, it is possible that the Altar Piece, as part of the contents, became the property of Henry VIII (12), (13) and (14). The Altar Piece could then have stayed at Knole until it eventually passed into the hands of the 1st Earl of Dorset, Thomas Sackville, when he was granted Knole in 1566 by Elizabeth I and it has remained at Knole ever since.

Ralph Morice, the Secretary to Thomas Cranmer, provided personal reminiscences of his time in service to the Archbishop. He wrote (15):

I was by, when Otford and Knol were given him. My Lord, minded to have retained Knol unto himself, said, That it was too small an House for his Majesty. Mary, said the King, I had rather have it, than this House, meaning Otford; for it standeth on a better Soil. This House standeth low, and is Rheumaick, like unto Croiden, where I could never be without Sickness. And as for Knol, it standeth on a sound, perfect, wholesome Ground. And if I should make abode here, as I surely mind to do now and then, I will live at Knol, and most of my House shall live at Otford. And so by this means both those Houses were delivered up into the King’s Hands.

In 1538 during the Royal Progress through Kent Henry VIII visited both Knole, from 14 to 17 and Otford from 21 to 24 September, the only times it is recorded that he ever visited these houses (16).

The transfer of Knole and the reminiscences of Morice are also referenced in pg.203 in (Jenkyns1833), pg.008 in (Brady1839), pg.348 in (Cox1844), and pg.266 in (Nichols1859); the last also summarises the fate of Knole until it became the property of Thomas Sackville, 1st Earl of Dorset, a cousin of Elizabeth I:

Knole was granted in the reign of Edward VI successively to the duke of Somerset and the duke of Northumberland. By queen Mary it was restored to the archbishop of Canterbury, then cardinal Pole; but, being conveyed to him personally, it returned to the crown on his death, and when queen Elizabeth stayed there for five days in 1573 it was called her own house. She granted it first to her favourite Leicester, and it afterwards became the property of the Sackvilles, under whose care this interesting specimen of ancient magnificence has been handed down little altered to our own times.

Is anything else in Winchester Cathedral Contemporary and Similar?

Both (Biddle2000) and (Croft-Murray1962) state that the intertwined initials are TG for Thomas Griffith (17) but the style of the individual letters in the inscriptions in the Altar Piece bear a strong resemblance to those in various locations in the Cathedral as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cathedral Location</th>
<th>Altar Piece Panel</th>
<th>Style in Altar Piece</th>
<th>Figure</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Presbytery Screen - 1526</td>
<td>Resurrection - 1525</td>
<td>152 is almost identical</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Presbytery Screen - T in EST DEO GRATIA</td>
<td>Betrayal &amp; Ascension - TT</td>
<td>1st T is almost identical 2nd T is different to G</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lady Chapel Door - G</td>
<td>Betrayal &amp; Ascension - TT</td>
<td>2nd T is different to G</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lady Chapel Vault - T</td>
<td>Betrayal &amp; Ascension - TT</td>
<td>2nd T is different to G</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Langton Chapel Vault - T</td>
<td>Betrayal &amp; Ascension - TT</td>
<td>2nd T is similar</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lady Chapel Piscina - T in Thomas Silksdene</td>
<td>Betrayal &amp; Ascension - TT</td>
<td>2nd T is similar</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It is the opinion of this author that the initials are TT and not TG.
The most significant works of art to survive the Reformation which are still in Winchester Cathedral are the paintings in the Lady Chapel commissioned by Prior Silkstede which have been dated to between 1500 and 1520, see (James1928). Those paintings and the reverse of the Winchester Altar Piece containing the images of the Sainted Bishops both use the grisaille technique.

A Speculative Conclusion
The will of John Dean, as John Avington had become known, is dated 2 January 1550. His request for burial indicates a close relationship with Prior Silkstede (18):

  And my body to be buryd within the my[n]ster and cathedrale churche of Wynchestre nyght to the sepulture or grave of the latt Priore Thomas Silksted.

John Avington’s clear admiration for his Prior may have led to him also commissioning a work of art in the same style as the Lady Chapel paintings. He may have used an artist who had been involved with those paintings and/or the writer of the frieze text in the Presbytery Screens. This commission could have celebrated two contemporary events, the election of John Avington as Sub-Prior circa 1524/25 and the completion of Bishop Richard Fox’s Presbytery Screens in 1525.

Acknowledgements
The images are reproduced by kind permission of Lord Sackville; the Winchester Altar Piece is part of the private Sackville collection at Knole.
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The Contemporary Sources

Abbreviated citations are used in this list of contemporary sources. These are shown within round brackets and the full reference can be found in the Bibliography.

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(2) Appointment of Proctors to a General Chapter at Westminster by Prior Thomas Silksted - 1520 Feb 17, Item 046, fl.023r, in Ledger Book II - 1497-1533, Winchester Cathedral Library, Reference W53/D/2

(3) Election of Prior Henry Broke, 1524 Dec 02, ff.075r-080r, in Register of Richard Fox, Volume V - 1522-1534, Hampshire Record Office, Reference 21M65/A1/21

(4) Hamme Manorial Roll, 1518 Sep 29 to 1519 Sep 29, mm.001r-001v, Winchester Cathedral Library, Reference L37/6/47

(5) Hamme Manorial Roll, 1523 Sep 29 to 1524 Sep 29, mm.001r-001v, Winchester Cathedral Library, Reference L37/6/48
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(17) Thomas Griffith, pg.128 in, Works: Hampton Court, The National Archives, Reference E36/236

(18) Will of John Dean - 1550 Jan 02 and Probate - 1550 Jan 11, pg001, Hampshire Record Office, Reference 1550B/26/1 Transcript - Will of John Dean, ff.231r-232v in, Baigent Papers, Volume II, XVIth Century Wills I, Winchester Cathedral Library, Reference W39B/4
Figure 1 - Left - The Betrayal
Figure 2 - Middle - The Resurrection
Figure 3 - Right - The Ascension
Figure 4 - Left - Saint Birinus
Figure 5 - Middle - Saint Aethelwold
Figure 6 - Right - Saint Hedda
Figure 7 - Presbytery Screen (1525) - Date of completion by Bishop Richard Fox

Figure 8 - Presbytery Screen (1525) - EST DEO GRACIA, the motto of Bishop Richard Fox

Figure 9 - Lady Chapel North Door (cir1510) - In Gloriam dei

Figure 10 - Lady Chapel Vault (cir1520) - T for Thomas in both Thomas Silksteade and Thomas Hunton

Figure 11 - Bishop Langton Chapel Vault (cir1500) - T for Thomas in Thomas Langton

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