

THE BEVIS AND ASCUPART PANELS, BARGATE MUSEUM, SOUTHAMPTON

By ADRIAN B RANCE

ABSTRACT

This paper examines the form and decoration of the oak panels depicting Bevis and Ascupart which once decorated the Bargate in Southampton. The panels are set in a context of fifteenth- and sixteenth-century civic pageantry.

FORM AND DECORATION

The Bargate Museum, Southampton contains two wooden panels decorated with painted figures depicting Bevis of Hamtun and his squire, Ascupart. These panels are unique survivors of a class of artefact known to have played an important role in pageantry designed to enhance civic pride and prestige during the 15th and 16th centuries. A similar survivor is the Round Table at the Great Hall, Winchester but this is connected more with royal rather than civil pageantry.

The two panels are identical in size, measuring 326cm by 99cm wide. Each is made up of a number of tongued and grooved oak planks of varying depths ranging from approximately 32cm to approximately 12.5cm. The backs of the panels have been covered in bituminous type paint and the joints of the planks have been strengthened with strips of parchment. Both of these treatments presumably were undertaken to provide a protection against the weather. The back has been strengthened in each case with wooden vertical battens and later reinforced with steel battens. The frames of each panel appear to be recent.

The painted figure in each case represents a man of giant proportions a feature accentuated by a low horizon behind the figures' legs. The figures are painted in an Italianate renaissance style with both Bevis and Ascupart appearing as romanticised versions of classical figures. Bevis is wearing a plumed helmet, a breastplate of

armour and a short skirt painted in a manner that recalls Roman military uniform. He is draped with a long cloak that falls over one arm, the other arm carrying a rapier like sword with a decorative guard and quillon. Ascupart is similarly dressed but wears an eastern type of headress and carries a wooden club.

The two panels carry inscriptions that identify the figures represented. The Bevis panel carries the words *Sr. BEVOIS* across the top planks while the Ascupart panel carries the painted inscription *ASCA PART*, the word being split in two by the intrusion of the figure's headress. Additionally the Bevis panel carries a painted inscription by the giant's feet; on the bottom left hand corner is the date 1644; in the middle of the panel are the letters *MA*, and on the left hand side is the date 1319(?) which can be taken to represent the supposed original date, which while being fanciful, at least suggests that the 17th century restorer considered the panels to be of considerable antiquity when he undertook his work. The name of the painter is recorded in the Mayor's accounts for 1645-46 as a Mr Benger (SRO SC/5/3/19):

November 14th paid more to Mr Benger for new painting of the towne armes ij^lxs

The figures on the panels are now very difficult to decipher due to paint loss and fading, but close examination shows that the figures generally conform to the representation in an early 19th century engraving based on the panels (Fig 1). Recent work involving the examination and cleaning of the panels in the Conservation Studio of the Southampton Art Gallery and Museums has brought to light evidence that can be brought to bear in an examination of the date and origins of the panels.

Photomicrographs of cross sections of the



Fig 1. 19th century engraving depicting the figures on the Bargate Bevis and Ascupart Panels.

paint layers show a greyish ground layer consisting of coarsely ground black pigment particles probably mixed with chalk, which have been bound in a drying oil. In one cross section there are also the minute remains of a white underlayer, possibly a thick chalk gesso. There are four different ages of painting, the earliest remaining only in traces and extremely worn, particularly in the background. The original painting was probably much finer in detail than subsequent repainting which are often out of 'synchronisation' with the earlier underlayers. There is clear evidence that gold leaf was extensively used in the original painting. The inscriptions on each panel belong to one of the later repainting, probably to a renovation carried out in 1644 as suggested by the dates. An interesting feature of the examination is that it revealed the presence of numerous lead pellets especially in the heads, indicating that the panels had been used for target practice at some stage of their life hanging on the north face of the Southampton Bargate.

HISTORICAL REFERENCES

The panels appear to have been designed to fit onto the buttresses that flank the central archway of the north face of the Bargate (Fig 2). They are known to have hung there from at least the 17th century until they were removed and placed inside the building for safekeeping in 1881, at which time the Bargate Committee gave instructions for the panels to be restored. The earliest descriptions of the panels, together with the lions at the Bargate come from a record made by a Lieutenant Hammond who visited Southampton in 1635 (Douch 1961):

I entered at the North Gate thereof with no little feare, betweene the Jaws of 2. ramping Lions, and two thundrign warriors, Exipat, that fearefull gyant on the one side and braue Bevis of Southampton on the other, if aboue them had not beene plac'd our late renowned, vertuous Queen, Elizabeth to daunt their courage and quell their Fury, and to suffer peaceable Passengers to haue quiet and safe entrance.

Later engravings show the Bargate decorated with the two panels now inside the museum, the two lions and a carved and painted representation of the Royal Arms above the main carriage-way. The Mayors accounts for the years 1593 to 1594 provide details of expenditure in 1594 that show that at this time there was considerable expenditure on all three of these decorative elements outside the Bargate. Amongst other entries relating to these items, the following items of expenditure are recorded (SRO SC/5/3/1):

Payd for making ii new Lyons iiiij li

To y^e painter for painting the Lyons iiiij s

P^d for setting up y^e Queenes Picture for 2 men viiiij days xs

For the new painting of Bevis and Ascapart
payd the 2 day to y^e Paynter towards his work ij^lvs

payd to W^m Merryet grocer as appeareth by his bill for gold and collo^r for the Lyons and new painting Bevis and Ascapart vj^lij^svi^d

Payd Lewis Langley for mending ye frames of Bevis and Ascapart vij^s

There must be p^d to Foster fore beere about the picture and Lyons. vj^s

Additionally there are several items of expenditure to both new lions and the refurbishment of old lions at both the Watergate and at the Bargate. So far as the panels are concerned the main question is whether the entries refer to the refurbishment of pre-existing painting, or whether the panels are being constructed *de novo* or as replacements for earlier panels. The presence of gold leaf on the earliest age of painting on the panels does lend support to the view that this painting can be dated to 1594 when it is known that gilding was employed in the decoration of both lions and panels. In any case it would appear that the reference to 'new' lions and paintings suggest that the Bargate was



Fig 2. The north face of the Bargate c 1870 showing the Bevis and Ascupart panels together with the lions.

decorated with both lions and panels prior to 1594.

PARALLELS

The existence of these artefacts outside the main gateway to the town must be seen in the context of the well documented use of legendary, mythical or romantic figures in pagentry designed to bolster the civic prestige of boroughs in the later Middle Ages. The tradition goes back at least to the early 15th century when Henry V, returning to London from Agincourt in 1415, was greeted at London Bridge by two giants, and when the return of Henry V with his queen in 1421 was the occasion for a series of London pageants at which time the giant's head on London Bridge was replaced with a newly carved one (cf Anglo 1969). Pageants designed to greet important visitors at the entrance to boroughs played an important part in the first Tudor progress held by Henry VII in 1486, a progress designed to establish the authority of the new king, and the new dynasty. Henry and his retinue were greeted at York by a series of pageants full of allegorical references to contemporary issues such as the union of the houses of York and Lancaster, and at the gates of the city it was arranged by the organisers that the King should be greeted by the founder of York, called Ebrank, who would present the royal visitor with the keys of the city. In his speech to the king, Ebrank contrived to flatter the king with the obeisance of the burgesses while reminding his listeners of ancient and independent foundations of the city.

Similarly, ancient historical, or quasi-historical figures were employed to flatter Henry VII at Worcester and at Hereford where Ethelbert, ancient king of Kent presented himself as the protector of the city and Cathedral. At Bristol the pageant greeting the king was presented by King 'Bremnius', who like Ebrank at York, was assumed to be the ancient city founder and who made a point of pleading the poverty of the town whilst demonstrating its loyalty to the new monarch.

The panels of Bevis and Ascupart can be seen to fit into this well documented tradition of

pageants employing figures from mythology, quasi-history, legend or the metrical romances, in the political relationships between boroughs and state, at least in the Tudor period. It remains only to establish the date of the first erection of these figures on the Bargate and to analyse the symbolism that they employ as an indication of the likely occasion of their erection.

The departure of Henry V for the battle of Agincourt in 1415 would appear to be a suitable occasion for the use of such figures to promote adventures abroad and recent research on the Round Table at Winchester has established that the Arthurian stories were used for just this purpose well before this date. However, the style of the figures on the Southampton panels would probably preclude a date much before 1500.

The visit of the Holy Roman Emperor Charles V of Spain to England in 1522 also provides a context for the Bargate Panels. The visit was celebrated with a magnificent series of pageants that were mounted to celebrate Charles' entry into London. The first pageant set at London Bridge, showed two giants, one representing Samson holding the jawbone of an ass, the other Hercules armed with a mighty club, an arrangement reflecting the tradition of giants on London Bridge going back to the time of Henry V. In the middle of London Bridge was a building of imitation masonry with towers and gates above which were a fiery dragon and two fire-eating bulls together with Jason holding the golden fleece, to represent the order of the Golden Fleece, of which the Emperor was head, just as Henry was the head of the Garter (Anglo 1969). A series of succeeding pageants accompanied the royal progress through the City, each of which flattered the Holy Roman Emperor and the great Christian Prince, Henry VIII in different ways. The ceremonials served to underline the common dislike the two men had for the French and on June 16 a formal Anglo-Imperial Alliance was announced which had as its intention the invasion and division of France, which it was piously hoped would establish peace in the Christendom and so allow an expedition to proceed against the Turks, who only two years before had laid siege to and had captured Belgrade.

Charles then proceeded to Winchester where, according to a Venetian observer, Paolo Giovio, the Emperor was shown the Round Table which had been specially re-painted to the occasion. On 28 June 1522, the Imperial party arrived in Southampton for departure to Santander on the 6 July.

The anticipated arrival of the Emperor and his retinue of 2000 people and 1126 horse, caused a flurry of activity in Southampton, much of which is recorded in the Steward's accounts (SRO SC/5/1/32a). Prior to the arrival, for instance, a Richard Prower was paid 12s 10d for spending three days with his cart in 'cleaning the keys aganste the Comynge of the emprower'. There then follows details of 'Expensys uppon Dressynge of the town yatts ageynste and commynge of the Emprower the xxvii day of June'. The major expense was 4s 8d spent upon 'to pargytt and Whyt the bargatt and the Watergatt' together with 8d being spent on 'shreds to make syse' and 2d on 'wood to sethe it' and 3s 4d on a 'new Rope to hang the Cradyll'. In addition there are several recorded items of expenditure on the town guns which were clearly fired in salute on the occasion.

The recorded expenditure on the decorating of the gateway strongly suggests that some sort of pageant was constructed to welcome the emperor. If this was the case then it would have been most appropriate to model this along the lines of the story of Bevis and Ascupart. The two heroes would have served several purposes; being the, by then quasi-historical, 'founders' of Southampton they would have been ideal to demonstrate the civic dignity and ancient independence of the borough as well as emphasising the loyalty of its subjects. The story of Bevis and Ascupart was particularly popular during the 16th century (Lister 1971) and the role of these heroes in fighting the Mohammedan infidels would have been well known to the Imperial visitor who had after all just signed an Alliance which was aimed, amongst other things, at the renewal of the Holy War against the Turks.

The symbolism of the story of Bevis and

Ascupart was also particularly appropriate in the context of the work undertaken in 1593 on decorating the Bargate. Two years earlier Queen Elizabeth I had visited Southampton and had been greeted by the Mayor and burgeses outside the north face of the Bargate and had been given the gift of a purse of money. The subsequent decorating work on the Bargate involved the erection of the royal arms – the Queen's Picture – for which both the panels and the lions were particularly appropriate accompaniments. Bevis and Ascupart would have represented the ancient traditions of the borough in the same way as other 'giants' had done throughout the Tudor period at various cities, but the lions also gave an intriguing clue to the symbolism intended by this work. The lions appear in the story of Bevis of Hamtun in a sequence following the escape of the hero with Josian, his lover, and her chamberlain, Boniface. Bevis leaves Josian and Boniface in a cave while he goes looking for food and in his absence two lions appear and kill Boniface. However, the lions found that they were unable to approach Josian because they perceived her to be both a king's daughter and a pure virgin, a state that she had maintained throughout her marriage to the wicked Yvor of Mombraunt through the working of a charm. So Josian is saved and Bevis returns and kills the lions. What more appropriate symbolism could there have been for a borough to use than its own local 'legend' in honouring a sovereign who herself was the epitome of the cult of the virgin queen. The lions at the Watergate have long since gone but the wooden lions at the Bargate were replaced in 1743 by leaden lions that guard the gateway to this day.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to acknowledge the help of Mr T Craven, Conservation Officer at Southampton Art Gallery and Museums, and Miss S Thomson, Archivist at the Southampton Record Office in the preparation of this note.

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Author: Adrian B Rance BA AMA, Southampton City Museums and Art Gallery, Civic Centre, Southampton

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