III.—*On a panel of tapestry of about the year 1400 and probably of English origin.*
By SIR CHARLES HERCULES READ, LL.D., F.B.A., Vice-President.

Read 15th March, 1917.

THE piece of tapestry that forms the subject of this communication has but the shortest of histories (pl. VII). It formed part of the Heckscher Collection sold at Messrs. Christie's in 1898; and, attracted by the interesting character of the subject and the admirable preservation and brilliant colouring of the fabric itself, I secured it soon after the sale as it was on the point of going abroad. The Heckscher Collection was brought together in Vienna, and was of a miscellaneous character, containing some very fine works of art, among them an unusually perfect crosier head by Frère Hugo, the famous Flemish goldsmith, which I was fortunate in securing for the British Museum. It is hardly necessary to say that although the collection was formed in Austria, the objects composing it had been derived from a variety of sources, not least from England, as e. g. a Rhenish enamel formerly in the Beresford Hope Collection. No indication is given of the source whence the tapestry was derived. Since it has been in my possession it has been seen by a great number of my colleagues in continental museums and elsewhere abroad. All of these, French, German, Swiss, Flemish, and Spanish, were greatly intrigued as to its country of origin, but in every case each felt sure that it was not a product of his own country. Thus the panel acquired an added interest, and I had a photograph made, and circulated it among a limited number of authorities on the subject, both in England and abroad. The result, as far as the foreign authorities were concerned, only served to confirm the opinions that had previously been expressed; the English opinions varied from an English origin to a Swiss or German. As the experts in the two latter countries would have none of it, and presumably they would be good judges, these two countries, equally with France and Flanders, may be dismissed. Professor Prior, on whose judgement on a point of style I should be inclined to rely, leant towards England. Thus the matter stood when the Burlington Fine Arts Club announced a forthcoming exhibition of medieval heraldic art. It seemed to me that some useful opinions might be obtained if the tapestry were shown there, and I accordingly offered it to the Committee. During the exhibition it excited interest and comment. Sir Claude Phillips, writing in the *Daily*

TAPESTRY PANEL (c. 1400)

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Telegraph, called it 'the finest and most striking work of art in the exhibition', and adds, 'the composition is exceedingly dramatic, the technique decidedly finer than that of the contemporary German tapestries. . . . To a school which within a period of twenty years produced two such masterpieces as this panel of tapestry (1400) and that world-famous painting, the Wilton diptych (c. 1381), must be given a higher place in the art of the time than we at present accord to it.'¹ For myself, I should hardly have placed the tapestry on so high a plane in the artistic sense, but it is not the less gratifying to find so competent a judge as Sir Claude Phillips ready to concede such high merit to an object that I had bought for its artistic qualities. Its inclusion in the exhibition had, however, other results of a kind not depending upon artistic judgement or appreciation. One of these was the suggestion that the tapestry had been made for the Augustine priory of Pentney in Norfolk, the arms of which are those of the Magdalen as shown in the tapestry itself, and the dedication exactly conforms to its subject, viz. the Holy Trinity, the Virgin, and St. Mary Magdalen. Until an inventory of the goods of the priory in the early years of the fifteenth century be forthcoming, one can only regard this as a possibility, and as adding to the probability of the work being English. Another suggestion, due to the ingenious and fertile brain of Mr. Oswald Barron, has a greater weight on this latter question. In the Introduction to the Catalogue of the Burlington Club Exhibition he stated that in a manuscript in the British Museum (Harl. 2169), an armorial of English work of the time of Henry VI, were figures showing the same helm and crest of the Passion as are borne by the angel standing behind the figure of the Virgin. I proceeded at once to compare these figures with the tapestry, and the annexed block shows how nearly identical they are (pl. VIII). It is fortunate in this respect that the herald who compiled the armorial thought it necessary to repeat the figure wearing the helm on the following page, for the helm and mantlings are essentially the same in both, a fact that seems to me to show that he considered the type normal. There is no need here to labour the singular resemblance between these details on the tapestry and on fol. 72/67 of the manuscript. The absence of the cock of St. Peter on the column in the tapestry may be due to the upper edge having been cut; the other point, that the subject is reversed, is practically immaterial, for the whole tapestry is evidently reversed, as witness the **INRI** on the cross and the wound in our Lord's side, on the left instead of the right. The other features of the composition do not suffer by being reversed, unless conceivably the Virgin should have changed places with the Magdalen in relation to the central group.

¹ It will not be forgotten that there is no small diversity of opinion as to the nationality of the Wilton diptych. I myself have always been disposed to regard it as being English, but authorities of no small weight think it to be foreign.

THE ARMS OF THE PASSION
(Brit. Mus. Harl. MS. 2169, ff. 71/66 and 72/67)
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The similarity of these features in the tapestry to the manuscript, features, it should be noted, far more remarkable than any others in the whole composition, are sufficient to provide a *prima facie* case for an English origin for the whole design, and to throw the onus of proof to the contrary upon those who believe the work to be other than English.

Apart from this evidence, which one may call specific, there are other features which in my judgement help to lead us to the same conclusion. The faces of the two Persons of the Trinity have an unusually calm expression, an immobile placidity that I have always considered to be an indication of English work of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, as distinct from the French productions of the same time. The French faces of the fourteenth century in particular have almost always a simper or smile: this can be seen constantly on the small ivories, and to a degree on the larger sculptures. In England this expression is more often absent than present—in France and in French work the converse is the case. Yet another feature, also pointing the same way, is to be found in the remarkable anatomy of the figure of our Lord, in particular the inordinately small waist and the odd and inelegant drawing of the feet. Both of these peculiarities are to be found constantly in a contemporary group of works of art that are notoriously native both in general design and in detail, viz. the Nottingham alabaster tables (fig. 1). In them also may be often seen that placid type of face that I like to think is characteristically English.¹ The wings of the angels are more English than foreign; the same vigorous treatment is to be found on many examples in Prior and Gardner's work, at Westminster, Hawton, Notts., on the Percy tomb, the Gosberton tomb, at Blakeney, at Swine, and on the Suffolk tomb at Ewelme.²

Fig. 1. Nottingham alabaster.
The Crucifixion.

This in effect is the evidence in favour of the native origin of this panel, some of it direct and positive, some inferential and a matter of opinion. My colleague, Mr. J. P. Gilson, considers the style in favour of England; his colleague, Mr. Herbert, is unwilling to say that he sees anything specially English about

¹ The annexed block from an English alabaster table in the possession of Dr. Philip Nelson, F.S.A., illustrates these points, and there seems to me also great similarity in other respects between the faces and those in the tapestry, e. g. that of the Virgin and of the angel holding the cross.

² *Medieval Figure Sculpture in England*, figs. 82, 19, 370, 420, 501, 518, 526.

it, while Mr. Baird Wood, also of the Department of Manuscripts, takes the contrary view, and agrees with Mr. Gilson. Monsieur Bacri of Paris, an 'expert' in such matters, thinks it Swiss; on the other hand, Dr. Burckhardt of the Historical Museum at Basle, who makes a special study of Swiss tapestry, says he never saw a Swiss piece anything like it, and thinks it English. Mr. Kendrick, of the Victoria and Albert Museum, though he has 'never seen another tapestry like it', calls it German, and cites a panel at Würzburg that to my eyes does not at all resemble it, and is moreover nearly half a century later in date. As against this my German expert friends, when I had any, unanimously said it was not German. Sir William Hope, I understand, has said that he knows of no English angels habited like these; this is no doubt true enough, but again only negative. On the contrary and positive side comes our Fellow the Rev. E. E. Dorling, who states that 'he has no shadow of doubt that the heraldry and the helm are entirely English in form, character, and feeling; and if they, why not the rest of the design?' If I wanted the best of English opinion on this specific point, I should rely more upon Mr. Dorling than on any other single authority, for he is at once a true artist and an accomplished antiquary, and in matters of style and taste the combination is essential.

Another suggestion has been made, but I hardly like to set it down, after having quoted the opinions of so many persons who have claims to understand medieval works of art. It is nothing less than this—that the tapestry before you is a modern production inspired by Viollet-le-Duc. No one could have a greater admiration for the artistic capacity of this remarkable Frenchman, in spite of the terrible destruction for which he was responsible among the architectural treasures of his own country. But he was above all things an exquisite draughtsman, both of architecture and of the negligible adjuncts to his drawings of buildings. No one can fail to admire the skill shown in the tiny little human figures which serve to give scale to his views—a skill none too common among his fellow architects. The idea of his being the spirit which underlies so quaint and naïve a piece of medievalism as the tapestry now in question appears to me to be but little short of grotesque. Nevertheless, the suggestion had its uses, for it induced our Fellow Mr. Emery Walker to invoke the knowledge and experience of Mr. Dearle, the tapestry expert at Messrs. Morris's, who has actually woven tapestry with his own hands. Mr. Dearle kindly met Mr. Walker at the Burlington Club, and Mr. Walker reports on the interview as follows:

We took it out of the frame and unnailed one corner from the stretcher. We found the under side to be very much the same colour as the right side, showing, as we expected, the piece had never been much exposed to the light, but possibly kept stored away with the vestments of a church. Dearle immediately said that the red was dyed with kermes, the yellow with weld, and the blue with indigo; all three

colours used in medieval dyeing, and two of them still in use by Morris & Co., for dyeing the yarns of their own tapestries. He observed that the colours were not blended with the skill which is observable in the well-known sixteenth-century Brussels pieces, such as those which were made to illustrate the Triumph of Petrarch. I should say the other colours, the brown, &c., were all obtained by a combination of the three colours mentioned. I called Dearle's attention to the fact that the design was reversed; he explained that it would come so unless the tracing upon the warp threads were made in reverse, a process which would be rather difficult before the days of tracing-paper. . . . I forgot to say that Mr. Dearle said that it was woven upon a high warp loom, thus confirming the statement I made that there was no high warp tapestry woven in England from the days of the Mortlake factory until William Morris set up his looms at Merton Abbey, after his experiments at Hammersmith in the early eighties.

This evidence, from a practical man, strikes me as very satisfactory, and goes far to dispose of the theory of the modern origin of the panel. A little examination at close quarters, by any one familiar with the appearance of old tinted fabrics, will do the rest. Fresh as the colour scheme is as a whole, certain parts have undoubtedly faded so much that the detail is gone. A notable example of this is seen in the mouth of the Magdalen. At ordinary range, say six feet or so, the observer hardly perceives that the lips of the figure are carefully outlined, and they themselves are quite colourless, differing in this from all the other figures; clearly the dye used must have been another and much more fugitive tint. What other parts of the colour scheme have changed is not so easy to determine; but I should not hesitate to say that originally the harmonies and contrasts were by no means what we now see.

In dealing with such a subject as this, it might be expected that the inventories of the time would help by inference or induction. But as a matter of fact they are of but little use. The generic name for tapestry, Arras, from the chief place of its manufacture, so often usurped any proper description that inventories so far have not furnished me with any indication in the present instance. That high warp tapestry was in fact made in England in the fourteenth century is unquestionable. As to this the admirable work—so far as it goes—of Mr. W. G. Thomson on *Tapestry Weaving in England* provides ample evidence. When one considers the intimacy of the relations between the great personages in England and the Continent in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, this can hardly be doubted. Moreover, Mr. Thomson quotes half a dozen names of Englishmen working at tapestry in Arras or Paris in the fourteenth century, in itself a probable thing and in favour of figured *haute lisse* tapestry being made at the time in this country.

Although the design of the tapestry is well shown in the plate, it is desirable

to append a brief description of it, and to indicate the colours. It represents the Adoration of the Holy Trinity by the Virgin and St. Mary Magdalen, attended by two standing angels. The ground is dark blue, the mound at the bottom being a variegated yellow and green, over which are growing flowers, mostly red and white. The Almighty wears a garment reaching to the feet, with pale brown stripes, and over this a rose-coloured cloak, turned back with yellow and green, the outlines here and elsewhere being of a dark brown. The nimbus is yellow with a brown cross, and the hair and beard grey. Our Lord has a yellow-brown beard and hair, and a similar nimbus, but with rays, the crown of thorns green: the dove is white with red feet. The Virgin wears a close garment with long sleeves, with pale-brown stripes as before, a blue cloak, dark in the lines, light in the mass, lined with rose colour, shaded, the edges being yellow; yellow nimbus jewelled red and blue. The Magdalen has a similar undergarment, but with slate-blue vertical lines, and a pale-yellow cloak shaded with green, and lined with a colour now much faded. Golden-yellow hair much frizzed out, nimbus of concentric circles of rose, blue, yellow, and blue; foot dark brown. The angel holding the cross has a green sleeve, but over all a cloak with red and yellow stripes, having a collar and vairy border of white and pale brown, the wings are yellow reinforced with red: golden-yellow hair and rayed nimbus, diadem surmounted by cross all in red. The cross yellowish white shaded darker, the banner white with pale-brown streaks, the ointment pots rose-coloured, the label white with brown letters, red and blue stops, and green edging. The shield contains most of the above-named colours, the fields being, one and four blue, two and three pale yellowish green. The angel holding the helm wears a yellow robe with green stripes, with wide hanging sleeves lined vair, rose-coloured sleeves of undergarment showing; the wing is yellow with green lines; the helm is pale blue shaded dark, the mantling a faded tint, once perhaps reddish, the torse yellow with green stripes, the column red, and the sponge and spear yellow. All the faces, except that of our Lord, have a delicate pink tint in the cheeks.

POSTSCRIPT.

Since the foregoing was written, I have had a communication from Professor Prior, Slade Professor at Cambridge, who was unable to be present when the paper was read before the Society. As this letter deals with certain specific points raised in the paper, it is not only just but useful to give the substance of Professor Prior's remarks. They are the more valuable as containing the opinion of Dr. James, Provost of King's, also. Both of these authorities agree in finding nothing in the tapestry that to their eyes is *un-English*. As regards

the 'habiting' of the angels, Mr. Prior says, 'the angels on alabasters are habited just as your tapestry shows them. The angels' wings, all separately feathered, Dr. James thinks a decidedly English trick, as on the Norfolk roofs. I would point to the boss carvings at Wells and Worcester,¹ and there are "weeper" angels on alabaster tombs so habited and winged.'

Mr. Prior makes another suggestion that seems to me inherently probable, though the idea had not occurred to me, viz. that the kneeling figure under the banner with the pots of ointment is not the Magdalen, but St. John the Evangelist. The drawing of the figure certainly suggests this, but I must confess that the presence of the banner with the arms of the Magdalen made me uncritical as to the person represented, and I accepted the significance of the shield much as if the name had been written there.

Mr. J. H. Dearle has kindly furnished the following note of his opinion as expressed at the meeting:

The very interesting and exhaustive remarks of Sir Hercules Read have left us absolutely convinced as to the antiquity of the work, and he has dealt so completely with the subject from an artistic point of view that it seems to me to be only necessary to add my own reflections on the technical side.

To my mind the question to be decided is as to whether this little piece of tapestry is very old or very new, i. e. is it archaic in date as well as in character? or is it a modern reproduction of a design in archaic style?

I am inclined to think that it is very old and remarkably well preserved both as to its colour, strength, and the condition of its fibre. The colour is as fresh on the front as it is on the back: an effect rarely found in old tapestries; in addition to this the dark outlines are in a wonderful state of preservation. These being produced in wool dyed with an admixture containing iron, their well-preserved condition is very notable, and might form an argument against the antiquity of the work—not by any means conclusively, however, because careful protection from light and atmospheric action would retard or entirely prevent decay or any such development of these evidences of age: this might easily be accomplished either by accident or intention.

In the character, in the execution of the work, and in the nature of the colouring I think I discern strong evidence of antiquity.

The general style of the design, both as to subject-matter and drawing, belongs to a remote period, and I should not feel inclined to support a contention that this in any way corresponds with a period which may be said to be indicated by the fresh condition of the colour, neither am I inclined to think that it is a modern copy of an older original: if this were so, surely the more famous original would be readily located; further, I am indisposed to think that the design is the result of a modern effort to produce a drawing of Gothic character.

The simplicity of the execution and general style of the weaving show no sign of modern feeling or of the influence that is responsible for the horrors that have come from

¹ *Prior and Gardner, op. cit.*, figs. 599, 600.

the looms of the Gobelins works ; indeed, the absence of hatching proves that the weaver had not enjoyed the advantage of the fine examples produced by the skilled Flemish weavers of the fifteenth or sixteenth centuries, and there is very little tapestry woven after the fifteenth century that does not show the effect of these examples so far as concerns the technical methods of weaving and general treatment of the designs produced, an influence which was maintained for more than a century. After this the tendency to degeneration was evident, and tapestries became both in design and execution more elaborate and less decorative in character, until in modern times there are few works which can escape censure for viciously inappropriate and inartistic ideals. This little piece of tapestry most certainly does not belong to this later period, or come within this category, and I feel convinced that the simplicity alone of its treatment must relegate it to a period very early in the art of tapestry making.

The question arises, was it made on a high or low warp loom ? My own opinion is that it shows exactly the freedom of style which comes in work executed on a high warp loom, but this does not in any sense mark the period of the work, because it might have been so done either yesterday or fifteen hundred years B.C. I do not attach great importance to the fact that the design has been reversed in transferring to the warp of the loom, neither do I think that any particular decision can be reached by considering the point.

The colour treatment of this tapestry does not reveal to us very much : it is as simple as the design itself, and is therefore good ; the palette is a limited one, there being very little more than red, blue, and yellow : this is in exact accordance with the best traditions of medieval work of this kind. The actual dyes used in the production of these colours correspond with these traditions, and are for blue indigo, for red kermes, and for yellow probably weld, three of the most ancient dyes known, one of which, viz. kermes, a red of singularly beautiful kind, though of no great strength, has fallen out of use practically since the sixteenth century, when it was superseded by cochineal.

These various considerations of technical points in connexion with this tapestry bring me to the conclusion that it is a well-preserved production of perhaps the fifteenth century of a nation which is not to be decided so certainly, but I am confident, after observation of the crudity of the workmanship and the general character of the drawing in the design, that we shall not be wide of the mark if we ascribe it to one of our own countrymen of the early fifteenth century.

It is curious, perhaps, but none the less gratifying to me, that the conclusions I have reached so closely agree with those of Sir Hercules Read, formed after investigations along a much wider and more intricate path.