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A DAMASK LINEN CLOTH WOVEN WITH SACRED  
DESIGNS AND DATED 1631.

By the Rev. G. MONTAGU BENTON, B.A.

(Read Monday, 28 April, 1913.)

Some time ago an American gentleman, Mr George Wistar Kirke, of Flatbush, Long Island, New York, wrote to me with regard to a damask linen cloth, which has been preserved in his family for some generations. Although there were no traditions as to its former use, the owner had of recent years conceived the idea, owing to the sacred character of the designs, that this cloth might perhaps be a 'fair linen cloth' for use at the Eucharist. Mr Kirke obtained various opinions, but as no satisfactory conclusion could be arrived at, he sent the cloth to England for exhibition at the Church Congress held last year at Middlesbrough. It is entered rather vaguely in the *Congress Guide* (p. 152) as "an 'old table cloth' or 'fair linen cloth.'"

Arrangements were then made for the cloth to be sent on to me for exhibition before our Society. On its arrival, the supposed 'fair linen cloth' proved to be a Flemish damask table cloth of a well-known type: it is, however, an extremely interesting specimen.

A few preliminary words as to the history of these cloths. It is well known that the term 'damask' owes its origin to the elaborate silk fabrics of Damascus, woven with diaper and other patterns: at the present day it is mainly applied to a variety of linen cloth displaying woven designs. The art of damascening textiles spread to Europe at an early date and found its greatest development in the manufacture of ecclesiastical and household napery in the sixteenth and succeeding

centuries. This industry became centralised in the flax-growing regions of Saxony, Flanders, and North France, a fact which accounts for the designs on these cloths invariably showing the influence of German or Flemish art. Linen damask weaving never flourished in this country to the same degree as on the continent; and although the Flemish began to emigrate to England in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, it does not appear that damask linen was manufactured here to any extent before the middle of the seventeenth century. These cloths, which were mainly imported from Flanders, were considered great luxuries, and owing to their costliness were confined to the richer classes.

A representative series of these pictorial cloths will be found in the Victoria and Albert Museum, and the Rev. C. H. Evelyn White, F.S.A., gives a descriptive list of a number of examples preserved in this country, in a paper (to which I am indebted) read by him before the Society of Antiquaries in 1904<sup>1</sup>.

Before describing in detail the cloth exhibited, it will be well to give a general idea of the class of subjects represented as a whole—there will be no need to differentiate between table-cloths and cloths of smaller size termed napkins.

Practically almost every variety of pictorial representation is found. Biblical scenes from both the Old and New Testament are frequent; the following subjects may be instanced: the Spies returning from Canaan\*<sup>2</sup>; Scenes from the life of the prophet Elijah\*; the Death of Jezebel; the Annunciation (early c. 1500)\*; the Nativity of our Lord and the message to the shepherds\*; Our Lord's interview with the woman of Samaria\*; the Good Samaritan\*; and the Crucifixion and Resurrection (blue and white.—German)\*. A few classical subjects are recorded, *viz.*: the siege of Troy; Pyramus and Thisbe\*; and Orpheus charming beasts and birds\*. Battle scenes and other historical events in modern history are also depicted, *e.g.*: the sieges of Tournay and Lille\*; the taking of

<sup>1</sup> *Proc. Ant. Soc.*, 2nd Ser., vol. xx., pp. 130 f.

<sup>2</sup> An asterisk denotes that cloths bearing these designs are preserved in the Victoria and Albert Museum.

Buda from the Turks; and the siege of Belgrade\*. Historical personages, too, are represented, *e.g.*: Queen Elizabeth\*; Louis XIII\*; Prince Eugene\*; the Duke of Marlborough\*; and King George I of England\*. Scenic and hunting subjects and heraldic devices also occur.

There must have been a comparatively limited output of these cloths, and the fact that they were wrought on hand-loom imparts to the designs an individuality and charm altogether wanting in the modern machine-made product.

We may now turn to the examination of the cloth in question. It measures 80 by 82 inches, and the woven designs consist of scenes from the life of Jacob. It will be noticed that, owing probably to the small size of the loom, the designs (as is frequently the case) are alternately reversed in horizontal rows: the cloth is thus reversible, the scenes being equally distinct on either side. The figures wear the semi-conventional costume we associate with Flemish religious art, and the principal personages have their names inscribed above or below them. The subjects are as follows, beginning from the bottom: (1) Esau shooting at a stag with bow and arrow—immediately above his name is the date 1631; (2) Jacob obtaining the blessing of Isaac—Isaac reclines in a four-post bed beside which Jacob kneels. Rebecca stands by, and her right hand rests on her son's back. A table on which is placed the dish of 'savoury meat' stands at the foot of the bed; (3) Jacob's vision at Bethel—angels are ascending and descending the ladder, at the summit of which the Almighty Father is represented issuing from conventional clouds. He is depicted as the 'Ancient of Days'—a venerable personage with beard and rayed nimbus. Jacob reclines at the foot, and behind him a city, apparently Bethel, is shown; (4) the meeting between Jacob and Rachel at the well. Jacob and a person of brigand-like appearance are removing the stone from the well's mouth: Rachel carries a shepherd's crook; (5) Laban embracing Jacob: behind the figures are seen an embattled gateway and a courtyard; (6) Jacob with the straked rods in his hand surrounded by sheep and goats: a well forms the back-ground; (7) Laban meeting Jacob after his flight: Rachel sits in front, and tents,

together with Laban's 'brethren' armed with spears or halberds, form the back-ground. A double vertical border runs along each side, filled with a slender wavy stem showing birds and floral designs; the vertical edging is of chequered diaper.

Owing to the courtesy of the Assistant-Keeper in the Department of Textiles, Victoria and Albert Museum, I have been able to compare this cloth with two fragments (T. 229 and 229<sup>A</sup>—1911) preserved in that institution. These fragments are woven with scenes from the story of Jacob and Esau, the representations in some cases being practically replicas of those on the cloth exhibited. More interesting still is the fact that the same date, 1631, is shown. The subjects are in the following order, beginning from the top of T. 229: (1) the Vision of the Ladder at Bethel; (2) Jacob obtaining the blessing of Isaac; (3) Esau shooting at a stag with bow and arrow; (4) Esau selling his birth-right to Jacob; (5) the meeting between Jacob and Esau; (6) Jacob wrestling with the angel; (7) Laban meeting Jacob<sup>1</sup>.

Dated examples of these cloths are rarely met with. The earliest dated cloth recorded in this country appears to be a fine heraldic cloth of 1603, exhibited before the Society of Antiquaries in 1902. The Museum at South Kensington possesses, in addition to the fragments above mentioned, two interesting dated table-cloths: one woven with the Prince of Wales' badge, S. George and the Dragon, and the Royal Arms of England (period of King James I), is dated 1617<sup>2</sup>; the other woven with the Royal Arms of England, the Royal cipher, and an equestrian figure of King George I, is dated 1718. The same Museum also possesses a napkin with the initials 'P.E.M.,' and the date 1630 worked in one corner.

Apart from the date, the cloth before us is a very fine speci-

<sup>1</sup> The Assistant-Keeper in the Dept. of Textiles kindly informs me that two cloths have recently come under the notice of the V. and A. Museum, woven apparently with the same scenes in the History of Jacob and Esau, as on the cloth described and these fragments. Both examples are dated 1631 and are in the possession of Miss Mayo and Mr J. A. Matthews respectively. Miss Mayo's cloth seems to be identical in design with Mr Kirke's specimen.

<sup>2</sup> Mrs Owen Gould has on loan at the V. and A. Museum a cloth of closely similar pattern, dated 1609.

men, and it is therefore of considerable importance. Mr Kirke has happily shown a desire for it to remain in England, and I am hoping that he will accept my suggestion of the Fitzwilliam Museum as being a suitable home<sup>1</sup>.

A few notes as to the history of this cloth may be of interest. It belonged to a Canon Lillington, private chaplain to George II, who died about 1750. Another possessor was the Rev. George Lillington, LL.B., Fellow of Wadham College, Oxford, who died in 1794. This gentleman was admitted to the Diaconate in the Chapel of Gonville and Caius College, Cambridge, Sep. 22, 1751, by Sir Thomas Gooch, Bishop of Ely. The initials  $\frac{L}{MA}$  are worked in the top left-hand corner; they belong to Mary Anne Lillington, daughter of the last-named, and great-aunt of the present owner.

Mr BENTON further remarked that these cloths although manufactured primarily for domestic purposes were sometimes, on account of their costliness and suitability of design, presented to churches for altar use. He instanced the churches of Knapwell, Cambs., Hemingstone, Suffolk, and Bolney, Sussex, as possessing cloths of this nature.

<sup>1</sup> Since this paper was read, Mr Kirke has generously presented the cloth to the Fitzwilliam Museum (Accessions number, Misc., 2. 13). It will be framed and placed on permanent exhibition when space is available.

A similar table-cloth was exhibited by Mr W. L. Beale at the open meeting on the 19th of May, 1913. This cloth was woven with figures of the sun and moon subscribed with the words "Siste Sol in Gibeon et Luna in Ajalon"; also with pictures of the bombardment of a city (Ryssel) and with figures of Prince Eugene on horseback.

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n. p. means that the Communication has not been printed in full.