

Short article



The 'Europa' fireback at Preston Manor, Brighton

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In volume 23 of the *Sussex Archaeological Collections*, Samuel Evershed described a pictorial fireback which he had deposited in the Royal Pavilion, Brighton (Fig. 1).¹ He recorded its ownership over the preceding 20 years, since it had belonged to a blacksmith in West Grinstead. Writing in 1871, with the conclusion of the Franco-Prussian war fresh in mind, Evershed proceeded to interpret the scene as the rape of Europa.

In Greek mythology, Europa was the daughter of Agenor and Telephassa. Zeus fell in love with Europa and, disguising himself as a magnificent white bull among a herd of her father's cattle, which he had persuaded Hermes to drive towards where she walked, insinuated himself into her affections with

uncharacteristic bovine gentleness. Europa climbed on Zeus's back, whereupon he swam away with her, fetching up on the shore of Crete where he turned himself into an eagle and raped her. She subsequently bore him three sons, among them Minos.

The scene depicted on the fireback, however, bears no relation to the mythological tale. We see a man and a woman in the dress of the mid-17th century, processing through a garden, the woman's train carried by a child, a parasol carried aloft by a servant, and a horse following the party. The word 'EUROPA' at the bottom of the central panel is the only indication that the scene might have any connection with the legend. Typical of the 'Dutch' style of fireback, the central pictorial panel lies within a beaded edging of arched rectangular shape. Within moulded edging a border of hanging flowers and fruit significantly includes pomegranates, a symbol of fertility. The plate is surmounted by a pair of sea serpents, at the top of which would have been a cluster of acorns, but that has broken off. At the base of a cartouche bears the inscription 'L7G'. An identically decorated central panel with the word 'EUROPA' in the same position can be seen on a fireback in the Slade Mitford collection in the Servants' Corridor at Petworth House, although it is in a different frame without the inscription in the cartouche. Two other firebacks there, with different central panels, have frames with the inscription 'L6G', and the author has noted a frame with 'L8G' on a fireback at Hampton Court Palace.² 'LG' would seem to have been the initials of the otherwise anonymous carver of the wooden pattern used to form the mould from which the border was cast, the numbers acting as a serial indication of the decorated frames that could be combined with interchangeable central panels.

Most firebacks in the 'Dutch' style portrayed either classical or biblical scenes, or were illustrated by the representations of virtues or other allegorical figures made popular from early in the 17th century by collections such as the *Iconographia* published by Cesare Ripa. Some were copied from paintings, or from engravings thereof, by established artists such as Rubens or Vouet. Such is the case with the Europa fireback, which was derived from a coloured etching, attributed to the Bohemian artist Matthias Czwiczek, of the Princess Louise Henriette of Orange-Nassau (1627–67) and her husband, the Elector Friedrich Wilhelm of Brandenburg, Duke of Prussia (1620–88) (Fig. 2). On the reverse of the etching is the date January 1645, nearly two years before their marriage in December 1646. Friedrich Wilhelm, known as the *Grosse Kurfürst*, or Great Elector, was a skilful ruler who succeeded to his dukedom at a critical period towards the end of the Thirty Years' War. His marriage to Louise Henriette was seen as forging an important bond between two European dynasties. Matthias Czwiczek was the painter of several large pictures of Friedrich Wilhelm and his wife.

The etching was reproduced in a paper of 1903 by Paul Seidel on images of Friedrich Wilhelm and his wife.³ Then in the museum at Kassel, it was described as having been etched on copper, with the inscription 'EWROPA' on the reverse of the plate, and with the initials 'FW' and the word 'ORANIEN' on



Fig. 1. S. Evershed's etching of the fireback now at Preston Manor (Sussex Archaeological Society).

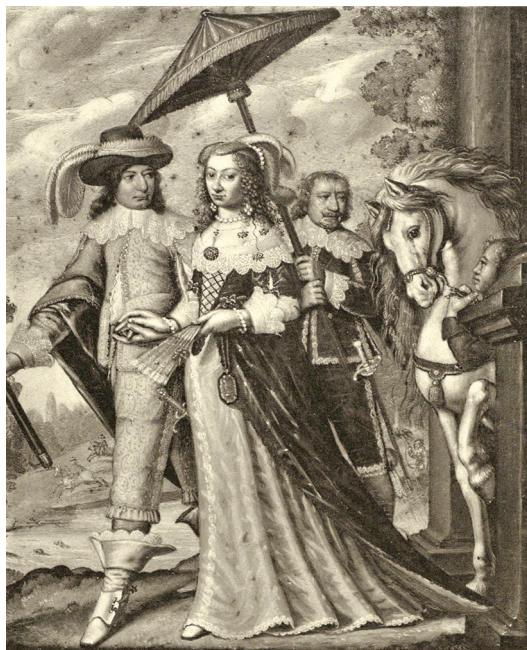


Fig. 2. Print of Matthias Czwiczek's portrait of Louise Henriette and Friedrich Wilhelm of Prussia (Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam).

the reverse of the etching. Regrettably neither etching nor plate is any longer in the museum at Kassel. There is no way of telling when or with what motive the 'EWROPA' inscription was placed on the back of the plate. But it connects the plate with the fireback, and maybe the unifying spirit which attended the marriage of Friedrich Wilhelm and his wife suggested the allegory of Europe.

The popularity of allegorical or iconographic scenes and emblems led to sets of plates of the planets, the elements or the continents being published in the 17th and 18th centuries, and such plates provided subject matter for firebacks.⁴ A set of plates portraying allegories of Asia, Africa and America was designed to complement the Europa fireback,⁵ although those three images were probably created to order rather than, as with Czwiczek's initially unrelated etching, making use of an existing picture. The fireback representing Asia is clearly a pastiche of the etching of Wilhelm and Louise, with the figures adopting similar poses and the structural elements in the scene similarly arranged (Fig. 3). The same designs for all four known continents were used half a century later on a set of maiolica tiles (Fig. 4). Following the example of the Europa composition, the representations of the other continents each include an adult male and female couple and a child, all dressed (or undressed) stereotypically for their continent, and with an animal in a stylised landscape.

A depiction of the mythological rape of Europa also formed the decoration on a fireback (Fig. 5), taking as its source the edition of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* published in 1581



Fig. 3. Iron fireback with an allegorical representation of Asia (private collection).

with woodcut illustrations by Virgil Solis; this, too, inspired representations in other media, including maiolica and needlework.

Although many copies of firebacks in the 'Dutch' style were cast in England in the years following the importation of originals during the reign of William III, it is as likely that the subject of this note was made in the Siegerland, in north-west Germany, for sale in the Netherlands. In the late-17th century the county of Nassau-Siegen was held by a branch of the family of Orange-Nassau that ruled the United States of the Netherlands. There is no basis for Evershed's unwavering assertion that it was cast at the ironworks in St Leonard's Forest, near Horsham, the furnace there having ceased operating by 1615.⁶ The fireback has remained property of Brighton Corporation (now Brighton and Hove City Council) and is currently on display at Preston Manor.

The Revd Edward Turner, editor of the *Collections*, in his preamble to Evershed's description, saw the design on the fireback in the context of the, then recent, conflict that had resulted in the 'rape' of France and its loss of Alsace and Lorraine. It is ironic that the image which inspired the design was in all probability intended to symbolise a civilised ideal of Europe in contrast to more savage parts of the known world.



Fig. 4. Set of maiolica tiles with the same allegorical representations of the four continents as on iron firebacks; Castelli c.1740 (photo: Sotheby's, New York).



Fig. 5. Iron fireback at Hampton Court showing the abduction of Europa by Zeus, based on an illustration from Ovid's *Metamorphoses* by Virgil Solis (photo: Warburg Institute).

NOTES

- 1 This note is an expanded version of an article that first appeared in the *Wealden Iron Research Group Newsletter* **47** (Spring 2008), 7–8. S. Evershed, 'Chimney Back of Sussex Iron', *Sussex Archaeological Collections* **23** (1871), 119–22.
- 2 J. Hodgkinson, *British Cast-Iron Firebacks of the 16th to mid-18th Centuries* (Crawley: Hodgers Books, 2010), 186.
- 3 P. Seidel, 'Die Darstellungen des Grossen Kurfürsten gemeinsam mit seiner ersten Gemahlin Louise-Henriette von Oranien', *Hohenzollern-Jahrbuch* 1903 (Berlin, Leipzig: Giesecke and Devrient, 1903), 73; I am grateful to Marten Brascamp for information about this paper and the fireback, and to Julia Hockley for translating the text for me.
- 4 Hodgkinson, *Firebacks*, 195–203.
- 5 W. Elling and S. Winkler-Borck, *Ofen- und Kaminplatten* (Vreden: Hamaland Museum, 1992), 180–2; the fireback they tentatively describe as representing Africa is, in fact, of America.
- 6 Wealden Iron Research Group Database [accessed 26 Oct 2015: <http://www.wirgdata.org/searchsites2.cgi?siteid=656>].