THOUGHTS ON THE ROBESSART TOMB

***by Nathaniel L Taylor*[1]**

ABSTRACT

Following the article on the Robessart tomb in Westminster Abbey in our last issue, Nat Taylor provides here some further insights into this most complex of monuments. Recent work provides important context for the study of elaborate heraldic tombs of this era, of which the Robessart tomb is apparently an unusually complex example. This piece explores questions raised by the presence of the shields of Sir Thomas Blount and members of the Sutton family.

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I was struck by the fascinating and detailed piece on the tomb of Sir Lewis Robessart, KG (d.1431) by Cecil Humphery-Smith (2004) in the last issue. Mr Humphery-Smith has shown how the Robessart tomb in Westminster reflects something of the career and connections of a Hundred-Years-War campaigner with extensive blood ties in Castile and Hainault. Identifying the forty-six coats of arms listed in this piece is a daunting task indeed. Seeing Sir Lewis laid out at the center of a brief ancestor-table, as well as a diagrammatic representation of the arrangement of the all the various shields on the tomb, would perhaps have given readers a better overview to this complex problem[2].

The genealogical, social and artistic contexts of this sort of tomb have recently been showcased in a fine book by Anne McGee Morganstern[3] (2000), *Gothic Tombs of Kinship in France, the Low Countries & England*. The book sketches the continental origins and early evolution of monumental chest-tombs with elaborate heraldry, offering a good background on the tradition in which the Robessart tomb was created. Originating in the Low Countries in the early thirteenth century, such tombs became popular in England under Edward III; quite possibly the Hainault connection of Edward and Philippa had something to do with the importation of the fashion. It is interesting to note that, with 46 shields, the Robessart tomb is more complex, heraldically, than any of the several examples showcased in Dr Morganstern's book.

On tombs of royalty and members of the highest nobility, the arms tend to be those of relations — either illustrious ancestors or the chief contemporary kin of the deceased. However, Morganstern notes a particular exception: tombs which appear to celebrate military comradeship as a surrogate or addition to one's blood kin or close affines. One example she explores is that of Sir Hugh Hastings at Elsing, Norfolk (d.1347), an early casualty of the Hundred Years' War. His tomb is not one of the great chest-tombs, but a more humble brass, which nevertheless represents a frieze of arms and a trompe-l'oeuil canopy recalling more grandiose heraldic stone tombs. Almost all arms on the Hastings tomb represent those who fought with him at Crécy, though only some of them (apparently) are his kin. To follow Morganstern, this

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2 One might also note some internal inconsistencies which suggest the piece was compiled over a long period of time. In more than one case arms whose relevance is conjectural in one place (e.g. Lyston, shield No. 22, p.183 and n.20), are elsewhere confidently placed (in this case, in the Bourchier stemma, p.190).

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exemplifies a trend shared by many tombs of Hundred Years' War veterans. It seems likely that at least some of the 46 shields on the Robessart tomb may be there for the same reason.

Robessart's own immediate male-line ancestry and alliances appear to account for the principal (carved) shields (numbered 1-6), with quarterings and impalings of Robessart, though it is unfortunate that the pairs 3-4 and 5-6 can as yet only be explained by conjecture. Is the reverse impaling of No.5 perhaps done for some sort of heraldic courtesy owing to the placement of this shield on the tomb or in relation to the others, or does it really imply the marriage of a female Robessart marriage to a male Pottes, who might then also be ancestral to the decedent through the quartering on No.6?

It is not necessarily possible to predict to what group each shield may belong (Robessart's kin; his wife's kin; Robessart's comrades-in-arms) based merely on physical placement, though Mr Humphery-Smith's listing of the shields does seem to suggest some groupings based on relationship to Robessart or to his wife. As Morganstern has attempted to do for some of the programmes on the tombs she studies, it may be possible to discern an overall programme of at least some of the groupings of shields by considering them in their spatial arrangement. One preliminary question is whether the forty-six shields listed by Mr Humphery-Smith completed the original heraldic programme of the tomb, or whether there were additional shields, about whose blazons all information is now lost?

I can offer some further information and musings on two shields (or, more precisely, one shield, and one apparent group of shields). One bears an apparent genealogical connection; the other most likely represents one of Robessart's military companions, not a kinsman.

Sir Thomas Blount

Charles Evans would have been familiar with shield no. 21, since his children descend from the man represented there, and he had himself written on the genealogy and heraldry of this family[4]. The shield is given as quarterly, 1 and 4: *Or, a tower triple-towered Azure*; 2 and 3: *barry nebuly Or and Sable* (Blount). Cecil Humphery-Smith connects this with Sir Walter Blount, Lancastrian retainer and sometime diplomat in John of Gaunt's Spanish adventure (where he acquired the noble Castilian bride Sancha de Ayala), killed at the Battle of Shrewsbury. Humphery-Smith notes the tower in the arms as deriving from Sancha de Ayala, correctly seeing that 'Sanchez' or 'Sanchet' (as Ashmole had glossed it) is probably a corrupt reminiscence that the arms derived from Sancha de Ayala, Blount's wife (Croke, 1823). In fact, *Or, a tower Azure* are precisely the arms attributed to Pedro Suárez, paternal great-grandfather of Sancha de Ayala, by Luís de Salazar y Castro (1696-7). The triple-topped tower can be distinctly seen as the arms carved ubiquitously in Sancha de Ayala's father's palace in Toledo (now the Franciscan convent of Santa Isabel de los Reyes) and on the monumental tomb of her brother, also named Pedro Suárez (III, d.1385), now in the Museu Fredric Marès in Barcelona[5].

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[4] *Doña Sancha de Ayala, Lady Blount* (Charles Evans, unpublished, 1986). A copy of this article is available in the FMG library collection. It was not included in the *Complete Works of Charles Evans* (published by the FMG in 2003, see back cover of this journal) as it was incomplete at the author's death.

[5] Caviro (1980) pp.105-74, especially plates 96, 107, 109 (palacio), and 113 (tomb of Pedro Suárez).

The Blount achievement on the Robessart tomb (1 & 4, the tower of Pedro Suárez de Toledo; 2 & 3, Blount) is identical to that borne by Sir John Blount (d.1418), eldest surviving son of Sir Walter Blount and Sancha de Ayala (as described by Ashmole and Croke after him)[6]. However Sir John, a successful soldier (he won the Garter following a picturesque military engagement which earned notice in Froissart), died at Rouen in 1418. Likely this particular marshalling was also was borne by his brother and heir Sir Thomas Blount (d.1456), who in 1431 was the chief representative of the family, but for whom I am not aware of independent testimony of his personal arms[7]. At the time of Robessart's death Sir Thomas was Treasurer of Normandy under the duke of Bedford, and a seasoned and well-connected campaigner and military administrator in France; he certainly knew Robessart in the military context[8].

In addition to the military bond Blount and Robessart shared the interesting distinction of half-Castilian blood, fruit of John of Gaunt's Iberian entanglements in the previous generation. Surely there must have been other children of such Anglo-Castilian matches within the Lancastrian affinity of the early fifteenth century, following John of Gaunt's importation of his Castilian princess with a train of ladies-in-waiting. But were Blount and Robessart close kin via their mothers? To go by the example of Sir Hugh Hastings, it need not have been necessary for the tomb programme. It may be that many of the unidentified or ambiguous shields on Robessart's tomb represent a roster of his military co-campaigners alive in 1431. It is unfortunate that an excellent compendium of early fifteenth-century prosopography like Roskell's *History of Parliament* provides no routine heraldic information, let alone an ordinary with which to locate its subjects by their personal arms.

The Sutton Connection

Sir Thomas Blount was uncle to Sir John Sutton, KG, first Baron Dudley, through his sister Constance Blount; and to judge by the repeated appearance of 'Sutton' arms in the Robessart tomb we may posit a connection between Robessart and Sutton that is genealogical and not just collegial[9]. It is potentially confusing, though, that in Mr. Humphery-Smith's list of shields on the tomb two distinct blazons are given for Sutton (nos. 17, *Or, three chevrons Sable*; and 23, *Argent, a cross patoncé Azure*); hence there is ambiguity in other shields glossed simply 'Sutton' without blazon (e.g. nos. 38, 39)[10]. The only known close genealogical connection between Robessart and any Sutton appears to come through Robessart's wife Elizabeth Bourchier (born 1399). She was heiress to her father, Bartholomew, third Lord Bourchier, who had two wives: first Margaret, whom *Complete Peerage* calls 'widow of Sir John Sutton'

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6 Croke (1823), Ashmole (1672). On the Castilian quarterings in subsequent Blount arms see Taylor and Farmerie (1998).

7 Sir Thomas' oldest son and heir, Walter, first Lord Mountjoy, quartered not only his grandmother's paternal arms (the tower) but her maternal arms (the wolves of Ayala) before Blount. See St John Hope (1901) and Burlington Fine Arts Club (1916).

8 See his excellent biographical sketch in Roskell et al. (1992-93).

9 The 1551 marriage of Amy Robessart to Robert Dudley, Earl of Leicester, fifth son of John Dudley, Duke of Northumberland, can have no relevance to a tomb laid out in 1431.

10 Furthermore, John Sutton, KG, 1st Baron Dudley is often assigned (and his descendants certainly bore) *Or, a lion rampant Vert*; though Foster (1902) gives him *Or, two lions rampant Azure,* quarterly with *Argent, a cross patoncé Azure*. Other fourteenth- and fifteenth-century Suttons in Foster's list bore various unrelated arms, including, in one instance, *Or three chevronels Sable*.

(without evidence or further identification), and second Idonea Lovey[11]. Humphery-Smith's pedigree (2004, p.190) makes Elizabeth a daughter of Margaret, but *Complete Peerage* makes her a daughter of Idonea Lovey[12].

The double impaling of shield 39 on the Robessart tomb (Bourchier impaling two coats arranged per fess, 'Sutton'—which coat?—and Lovey) clearly represents Elizabeth's father with both his marriages. Whoever the first wife Margaret is, she cannot be the same as Margaret de Somery, wife of John Sutton II, Lord of Dudley, since that lady was born about 1290, and died in 1384, while Bartholomew Bourchier was born about 1368, since he was aged 32 and more at his father's IPM in 1400[13]. Margaret, wife of Bartholomew Bourchier, is not readily found among wives or daughters of the main Sutton-Dudley line in the appropriate generations, and her parentage must remain a mystery. But nevertheless, the appearance of 'Sutton' shields in the tomb array, especially in proximity with other Bourchier alliances (shields 39-45 and, perhaps, 17-19) suggests some fairly close connection.

Assuming that Margaret Bourchier was born a Sutton, and all 'Sutton' shields here connect via her, we still are given conflicting hints about whether she, or Idonea Lovey, was Robessart's mother-in-law. First, shields 34-39 could possibly be read as a symmetrical array representing Robessart's parents and his wife's parents: Robessart impaling Padilla, followed by Padilla plain and Robessart plain; all followed by Bourchier plain, and Sutton plain, then Bourchier impaling his two wives (Sutton and Lovey). Yet, in contrast, the single shield 43 (Bourchier, Coggeshall, Prayers, and Lovey quarterly) could imply Robessart's wife's descent from Lovey rather than Sutton.

This apparent conundrum, like the individual identity of many other shields which may represent Robessart's companions-in-arms, seems yet unsolved. Nevertheless the unraveling of a knotty and large genealogical puzzle like the Robessart tomb should be of continuing interest from genealogical and historical perspectives. With the example of Morganstern's work on other 'Gothic tombs of kinship' it should be possible to draw further social and genealogical conclusions from this remarkable monument.

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[11] *Complete Peerage (CP)* **2**: 247 (Cokayne & Gibbs, 1912). A monumental brass depicting him with his two wives Margaret and "Iden" is or was at St. Andrew's, Halstead, Essex (rubbing in Ashmolean collection).

[12] Again without evidence. *CP* does not sufficiently narrow the dates for the death of Bartholomew's first wife or for his remarriage to justify an assignment of maternity.

[13] Bartholomew's age is not mentioned in *CP* — nor is the IPM of John, 2nd Lord Bourchier cited — but see Jones (1995).

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[14] Also available on line at the website *De re militari* of the Society for Medieval Military History: http://www.deremilitari.org/RESOURCES/ARTICLES/jones1.htm