

Treasured possessions: The material world of Henry VIII

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As a renaissance monarch, Henry VIII was expected to live in a magnificent manner and we know from Sir John Fortescue's book *The Governance of England* the range of possessions that a king needed to appear magnificent. He in placed particular emphasis on 'Riche clothes, riche furies, other than be wonned to fall vndre theyerely charges off his wardrober, rich stones...and do other such nobell and grete costes, as bi sitith is roiall magestie'. In addition to clothes and jewels, Henry VIII required a variety of other possessions most of which had a high financial value such as plates and goblets made of precious metals, warships or tapestries but some of which were prized for their rarity, novelty or workmanship including glass, maps and clocks. The specific details of these possessions were recorded shortly after Henry VIII's death in a document which is now known as the 1547 inventory. While none of the entries in this inventory were specifically described as treasure, many of them fit the three-fold definition which appears in the *Oxford English Dictionary*: first, items made from or incorporating precious metals and gemstones; second, accumulated or hoarded wealth and third, things that were valued by association with people or places that have significance. Using this definition, this short essay will explore what was of value to the king and why and how his acquisition and use of these objects made him appear magnificent rather than extravagant.

Taking the traditional view of gold and silver being synonymous with treasure, Henry VIII owned and used a high percentage of items that would fit within this definition. The royal regalia, beginning with that for the king and followed for that for the queen, formed the first group of items listed in the 1547 inventory, denoting its significance both to Henry VIII and his successors. In terms of weight - 278 1/8 oz of gold and gems - the regalia represented a fraction of the precious metal owned by the king and held in the Tower jewel house or within the king's chief residences including Greenwich, Hampton Court and Whitehall, but in terms of political, religious and social significance it was beyond compare. In contrast, the bulk of the gold, silver gilt and silver or white or gold plate that was owned by the king

was used for dining, display and celebrating mass and it was intended to demonstrate his wealth, taste and access to items in the most fashionable renaissance styles. More personal was his collection of jewellery which was mainly kept in the king's removing coffer, which travelled with him as he moved from one palace to the next and they held his most personal possessions. Henry VIII was renowned for his fondness for jewellery. While some observers felt his use of jewellery was ostentatious, others such as Stephen Vaughan noted with pride that he owned 'more than most of the princes in Christendom'. There was also a separate collection of jewels for the queen consort which was passed to each of Henry VIII's six wives in turn. While Kateryn Parr was the guardian of these jewels she would have had access to pieces owned by her predecessors as well as new items that were made especially for her including a jewel 'with H and K a Roose and E all of Dyamountes with Oystriche Fethers and five small Rudies'.

In addition to plate and jewellery, a wide variety of objects could be augmented and embellished with precious metals, especially luxury textiles which had a high financial value in the sixteenth century. In part this was a result of the limited quantities produced, the expertise required to produce complex weave, the high cost of the raw materials. Silk and the dyestuffs were expensive, while some of the fabrics used to make the king's clothes, such as cloth of gold, cloth of silver and tissue and tinsel, were woven with metal thread. For example on 24 February 1530 John Parker, yeoman of the robes, received a number of lengths of cloth of silver and gold tinsel for the king's use which he bought from Anthony Carsidony, an Italian merchant. In addition, the king's clothing could be decorated with metal thread embroidery or have applied metal decoration in the form of aglets, buttons or fringe. All of these components could be combined into spectacular garments as in the case of 'A spanishe Cape of crimsen satten all ouer enbrodrid with venice golde tissued...lined with crimsen vellut with v paire of Aglettes of golde beinge greate' which was a gift to Henry VIII from Kateryn Parr. Precious metals used in this way were regularly recycled throughout the king's lifetime and after his death. Some time after the funeral, 28 'Ingoldes of silver conteyneng golde coming of the kinges burul apparel' weighing 1,510½ oz were recorded at the palace of Whitehall.

Many of the king's furnishing textiles were also enhanced with metal thread. These included tapestries such as 'Nyne peces of riche verdours the

grounde or felde of golde, leather wall hangings 'layde with golde and silver foyle' or a cloth of estate of purple velvet 'embrowdered with clothe of golde' and 'frenge with purple Silke and venyce gold'. In spite of the break with Rome and the reform of the church, Henry VIII was quite conservative in his own religious beliefs and so he had all of the traditional liturgical textiles and plate in his chapel and closet. This was also true of the textiles that the king supplied to his wives for their chapels. While most of these textiles were made from and embellished with the most costly materials, a few of the items in the king's possession were not what they seemed. A set of four crimson velvet hangings kept in the wardrobe housed at the Tower of London were 'sett with counterfayte stones'.

Equally, not everything in Henry VIII's possession that was expensive was made of precious metals. Large items such as the king's ships, galleys and pinnaces were costly. Cumulatively, so were things that the king owned in large quantities, such as the 2,250 pieces of ordinance for use both on his ships and in the network of forts and castles that he equipped to protect the English coast against foreign attack. Returning to the textiles in his possession, his extensive collection of high quality bespoke napery or table linen represented a considerable financial outlay. Although not coloured and not of silk, the technical skill required to create the complex designs commanded high prices. A quite modest example of 'The history of Abraham and Sara' cost 12s the ell (27 inches) and contained 28½ ells.

By the same token, not all of the king's possessions had a high financial value, such as his selection of over 150 paintings kept at Whitehall and St James's, his musical instruments in the care of Philip van Wilder and his 'Glasses and other thinges of Earth' (or ceramics) in the charge of James Rufforth. These pieces were treasured for reasons other than price and the fact that they were stored and displayed in discrete groups reflects this. Taking glass as an example, it is evident that the king bought large quantities in the 1540s and shared his interest with others at court. On 24 December 1546 Sir Philip Hoby bought 98 pieces of glass for the king from Richard Waddington for £30. It is likely that some of these pieces were listed in the king's glass house at Whitehall in 1547 which held a collection of 774 items. Examples of high quality Venetian glass of the type bought by the king have been recovered from Acton Court, the home of Sir Nicholas

Poyntz, which Henry VIII visited in 1535 and the king's own palace at Nonsuch.

Moving to the second definition of treasure, it is possible to see Henry VIII's possessions as evidence of accumulated or hoarded wealth. This can be seen in two ways: first, that Henry VIII inherited goods of value from his father and second, that Henry VIII accumulated further goods of this type during his own lifetime. Starting with the former, contemporaries believed that Henry VIII had inherited vast financial reserves from his father. As late as 1519, the Venetian Sebastian Giustinian observed that 'His father left him ten millions of ready money in gold, of which he is supposed to have spent one half in the war against France, when he had three armies on foot'. In addition to receiving money, Henry VIII also inherited a number of items or heirlooms. Some came from his parents, Henry VII and Elizabeth of York, including 'one holly water Stocke of golde garnished with...H and E crowned', while others had been passed down from his Lancastrian predecessors including Henry VI. These included a bed with hangings embroidered with 'the kinges armes holden vpp with greate Anteloppes', the arms of Henry VI, the Royal Gold cup (which is just one of four pieces of plate to have survived from Henry VIII's jewel house) and the Clovis dorsal.

Second, it is evident from a range of sources, that while Henry VIII spent extravagantly to the point of needing to debase the coinage, he also accumulated and hoarded goods with financial value during the course of his reign. Henry VIII maintained caches of money at his leading palaces: Greenwich in the early part of the reign, being replaced by Whitehall in the 1530s and 1540s. Stocks of money were augmented with money given as gifts to the king at the New Year and by funds seized from traitors as in the case of 'a Canvas bagg of the late Duke of Norffolkes money in the chardge of sir John Gate and Sir Richard Sowthewell M^lCxxxviiij^{li} xxij^d' taken in 1546. On a less personal level, it has been estimated that as a result of the dissolution of the monasteries £415,005 6s 10½d entered the hands of the court of Augmentations and pieces of plate, including some from Christchurch monastery, entered the king's own jewel house.

However, to only think in terms of coinage and bullion is not to get a true picture of the king's accumulated wealth. By 1547 he owned 2,028 pieces of

tapestry, many of which included metal thread. It was a spectacular collection and many of the sets had cost considerable sums reflecting the skill of the designers and weavers and the cost of the raw materials. For instance, Henry VIII bought a set of tapestries depicting *The Story of David* for £410 5s 9d from John Cavalcante. Other silk textiles used for clothing and furnishings were also very expensive and the king kept a substantial store of these luxurious fabrics at his palace of Whitehall in addition to the Great Wardrobe. Between 1542 and 1547 Sir Anthony Denny, keeper of the palace, and Nicholas Bristow, his clerk and assistant, had dispersed 13,287 $\frac{1}{8}$ yards of silk and 4,243 $\frac{1}{4}$ ells of linen from this store. Of this, 1,101 $\frac{7}{8}$ yards or 8.3% went to Kateryn Parr, while 7,114 $\frac{1}{2}$ yards or 53.5% were delivered to her husband. In July 1547 a further 8,465 $\frac{5}{8}$ yards of silk remained in the king's silk house at Whitehall.

Finally, a number of the king's possessions were prized by him because of personal or sentimental reasons. Throughout his reign, Henry VIII kept the blue and crimson velvet Garter robes that had belonged to his elder brother Arthur in his own wardrobe of the robes. Whether he kept them as a reminder of a beloved sibling or that he was only king because of Arthur's untimely death, he kept them nevertheless. In a similar vein, he also retained the clothes of Jane Seymour, mother of his son. Her wardrobe was listed as being in 1542 at the palace of Whitehall in the care of Sir Anthony Denny, the keeper of the palace, and still there in 1547, 10 years after her death. However, perhaps Henry VIII's most prized possession was a person not an object. Prince Edward was described as 'England's greatest jewel' and he would have been all the more valuable to his father in light of the loss of Prince Henry (born and died in 1511), Henry Fitzroy (d. 1536) and the other stillborn sons born to the king by Katherine of Aragon and Anne Boleyn. Even so, the inscription on Holbein's portrait of prince Edward was careful to praise the child while praising the father more: 'Little one, emulate thy father and be the heir of his virtue; the world contains nothing greater. Heaven and earth could scarcely produce a son whose glory would surpass that of a father'.

As the discussion has shown, Henry VIII owned goods which can be directly equated with treasure because they were made of precious metals and those which can be compared with treasure either because they had a comparable value or because they were prized in spite of their financial

value. Interestingly, when listing the king's moveable goods in the preamble to the 1547 inventory, the clerks did not describe his possessions as treasure. Instead they listed them prosaically according to type or location and used the term 'stuff' to describe his household goods. Even so, it is these highly detailed descriptions which allow us to glimpse the wealth of possessions that Henry VIII owned and which hint at what has been lost. For instance, the 1547 inventory lists 'a written booke of certen of the late Quenes apparell' and 'a booke conteyning Juellez of the late Quenes' which, had they survived, would have filled in some of the gaps in our knowledge about how Kateryn Parr dressed as queen.

Like his father, Henry VIII hoarded his goods in his fifty- five palaces and houses as well as in specialist stores such as the Great Wardrobe and the Jewel House at the Tower, although unlike his father he spent with a liberality that would have ensured he would never be accused of avarice. However, this left him open to being accused of other vices such as greed and luxuriousness which were a step beyond magnificence. As such he was looked to writers such as Fortescue to promote the concept of royal magnificence that justified his need, as king, to be surrounded by expensive possessions on a daily basis and for opulent state occasions such as the meeting between Henry VIII and Francis I of France at the Field of the Cloth of Gold in 1520. The fact that cloth of gold was synonymous with this event at the time emphasises how the flamboyant use of precious metals was linked to power, authority and display in early sixteenth century kingship. However, whether the rewards that Henry VIII gained in return for this vast outlay of treasure, was debated at the time and is still the subject of discussion.