



‘A Marvel to Behold’: Gold and Silver at the Court of Henry VIII

Timothy Schroder

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Review by: Maria Hayward



'A Marvel to Behold': Gold and Silver at the Court of Henry VIII. By Timothy Schroder. Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2020. ISBN 978-1-78327-507-6. xxxii + 366 pp. £45.

In 1995 Timothy Schroder announced the discovery of a very rare piece of plate that had once been owned by Henry VIII: the San Lorenzo vase, which now belongs to the church of San Lorenzo, Florence. The meticulous detective work that led to this wonderful find was laid out in the *Burlington Magazine* and announced Schroder's expertise and his passion for gold and silver. It also added significantly to our appreciation of just how magnificent Henry VIII's long lost collection of gold and silver-gilt plate had been. Twenty-five years later, Schroder has brought to bear the same forensic approach and enthusiasm for the subject to a much bigger and more ambitious project: an exploration and analysis of the gold and silver plate owned by Henry VIII and his courtiers.

As Schroder notes, *'A Marvel to Behold'* is an object-based study of salts, goblets, plates, and the myriad of other types of secular and liturgical plate available in the first half of the sixteenth century. As such it draws on examples of surviving plate, many of which belong to Oxford and Cambridge colleges, as well as written sources including the 1521, 1536, 1542, and 1547 inventories of the king's plate, chamber accounts, gift rolls, and visual depictions in portraits and on tapestries. It is an excellent example of the type of scholarship that can be achieved when working with this range of evidence and methodological approach.

'A Marvel to Behold' consists of fifteen chapters, which are arranged in a loosely chronological arc focusing upon the life of Henry VIII. However, the analysis begins with three introductory chapters: the first on the role of a monarch's possessions in presenting their magnificence and princely virtue and the second on the significance of the jewel house and its master in relation to the acquisition, deployment, care/repair, transportation, and disposal of pieces of royal plate. The third acts as a transition between the general and the specific, considering the plate that Henry VIII inherited from his royal predecessors: most notably Richard II and Henry VII. This chapter also allows for a detailed discussion of the Royal Gold Cup which is decorated with scenes of the martyrdom of St Agnes and is another of the handful of pieces to have survived from Henry VIII's collection.

The remaining twelve chapters explore Henry VIII's reign in terms of the key events in his life and how these can be mapped onto the plate that was central to royal life. For example, chapter four, which considers the accession, offers a discussion of the royal regalia, while chapter five, "Defender of the Faith," explores papal gifts and the plate found in the chapel royal prior to the break with Rome. The theme of religious plate recurs in chapter thirteen on "Dissolution and Augmentation," but here the focus is on the loss of plate deemed unnecessary and superstitious by religious reformers.

Perhaps not surprisingly, eating, whether privy dining on a relatively modest scale, opulent banquets for ambassadors and celebrating the annual Garter feast, or diplomatic

spectacles such as the Field of Cloth of Gold, dominates several chapters. Here the reader is impressed by the quantity of plates and goblets and the variety of specialist dishes that were required as dining became increasingly formal and ordered. They are also reminded that the plate is more than a functional asset. It was often exquisite in terms of design and execution and was the product of careful collaboration between the leading artists of the day, including Hans Holbein the Younger and the royal goldsmiths.

While Henry VIII is at the heart of *'A Marvel to Behold'*, he is surrounded by a mass of other individuals. Some, such as the king's great ministers Thomas Wolsey and Thomas Cromwell, receive chapters of their own. Others, such as the king's six wives and his children, are woven into the king's narrative. Their stories allow for discussions of weddings, christenings, and gift giving, as well as loss of favour, trial, execution, and confiscation of goods. While Henry VIII's vast collection of plate was partly the result of inheritance and many purchases, it was also the product of a series of ruthless confiscations which contemporaries attributed to his avariciousness. The king's beautiful collection came at a high price.

In contrast, *'A Marvel to Behold'* is quite modestly priced. It is a sumptuous book to read, richly illustrated with numerous, well-chosen colour plates, which are produced to a high quality. These illustrations are a very important part of this book, greatly adding to its appeal and value by offering the reader images of familiar items alongside those much less frequently published. The visual side of *'A Marvel to Behold'* is matched by the fluent and engaging prose and both are underpinned by an extensive bibliography. The latter provides an excellent overview of the primary sources for such a study both archival and published, but it is surprisingly short in terms of secondary literature. There is also a very useful glossary to assist the curious reader when distinguishing a cruet from a chrisim or a gadroon from guilloche, along with helpful notes on hallmarks and metal purity.

As Schroder notes in his concluding chapter, when Arthur Jeffries Collins undertook his work on the Elizabethan jewel house in the 1950s, it was possible to identify just one surviving piece of plate from the 1547 inventory of Henry VIII's goods. The number has now reached four, with two more up for consideration, thanks in great part to the work of Schroder and others who share his passion for gold and silver plate. Hopefully *'A Marvel to Behold'* will result in other pieces being uncovered, offering us a glimpse of just how beautiful and technically brilliant Henry VIII's collection of plate was.

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