An Age of Autography: The English Sixteenth-Century Country House and Its Dated Inscription

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The sixteenth century witnessed a sudden profusion of dated inscriptions on facades, chimneys and porches of English country houses. Often these inscriptions were displayed in conjunction with monograms, names, or coats of arms of the owners of the house. This article centers on the origin of this phenomenon and on the subsequent development of this practice. The main questions asked are, firstly, who initiated this practice of immuring year-dates and when? Secondly, what were the motives behind the display of year-dates? Simultaneously with these English inscriptions, Continental castles and houses also became adorned with date stones. Hence, the phenomenon of dating English country houses will be presented within a wider European context. Given the fact that date stones were often flanked by initials, names, or coats of arms, past perceptions of time are researched concomitantly with historical attitudes towards self-presentation and, to put it somewhat anachronistically, identity creation. “Date-and-identity stones,”¹ it will be argued, formed part of a sixteenth-century culture that positioned the owners of country houses in time and space— in “time-space”²—vis-à-vis sovereigns, peers, and the lower echelons of society, as well as God (Giddens 85-86).

Reseaching English Date Stones

The phenomenon of dated inscriptions in an architectural setting is a little-studied subject. When reference is made to dates on country houses, it usually serves the purpose of establishing the year that the building was constructed or extended. The presence of dates on sixteenth-century domestic architecture has also been mentioned with regard to W.G. Hoskins’s renowned theory of England’s “great rebuilding” between 1570 and 1640, with dates corroborating or disproving the building surge that Hoskins observed.³ In even rarer instances, an attempt is made to analyze and explain the phenomenon of dates on buildings. Following Peter Burke’s thesis, formulated in his groundbreaking The Renaissance Sense of the Past (1969), Harold Mytum’s “Materiality and Memory” convincingly argues that an early modern concern with linear time contrasted sharply with medieval approaches to time. He moreover maintains that dates on buildings signal a “middle class concern with marking linear time” (383, our emphasis). On the basis of two datasets of dated country houses in Jersey and Wales (collected by Glendinning and Smith, respectively) and a study of dated parish church memorials and

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church bells, Mytum concludes that the late-sixteenth-century inscriptions emphasised a middle-class propensity for “change and newness, in contrast to the signs of antiquity or patina so important to the old establishment” (394).

The present article hopes to add to, as well as challenge, this rare exploration on the subject by means of new data and by a diachronic and European, comparative, perspective. The research is founded on a database consisting of over two hundred dated sixteenth-century English (and, to a lesser extent, Scottish) country houses, ranging from royal houses and prodigy houses to mere manors. It catalogues the name and type of the house; geographical location; the year-date(s) mentioned; the location of the year-date in or on a house; possible additional inscriptions consisting of a text, initials, names, or coats of arms; the appearance of the inscriptions in situ or out of context, the recording of the inscriptions (photographed or drawn), and whether they are authentic sixteenth-century specimens or later additions or forgeries. The sources used for compiling the dataset consist primarily of The Royal Commissions Inventories of Monuments and Nikolaus Pevner’s series, The Buildings of England, supplemented by both antiquarian and later inventories such as Leland’s Itinerary, Camden’s Britannia, and The History of the King’s Works. The information thus gathered is compared with similar datasets cataloguing dated country houses in present-day the Netherlands, Belgium, and Ireland, as well as with preliminary studies of date and identity stones in Germany, Spain and Italy.4

**Sovereign Time**

Baron Waldstein, Thomas Platter, and Paul Hentzner, England-travellers in the late sixteenth century, mentioned the poem that Queen Elizabeth wrote on the fabric of the palace of Woodstock when she was held prisoner there during the reign of Queen Mary. According to whose account one reads, Elizabeth wrote her lament on a shutter, a window, or a wall; while some asserted that the words were written with charcoal, others said she had scratched them into a windowpane with a diamond (Hecht 121-22; Groos 118; Hentzner 144-45; Marcus, et al 45-46). The poem started and finished with a year date: 1555. To find a date on either glass panel or shutter would not have surprised the visitors, since many of the contemporary royal houses and palaces carried year dates, accompanied by identity markers such as initials or names and coats of arms, mottos, impresas, emblems, or devices. At Hampton Court, Waldstein read on one of the doors of the lower chapel: “Vivat Elisabeth Regina, ANNO 1570” (Groos 149). A rose and crown accompanied by “E.R.” and “1566” could be found on the gatehouse of Hampton Court (Great Britain, Royal Commission of Historical Monuments of England, Middlesex 32). At Windsor Castle, the dates 1574 and 1578, together with the queen’s name and title, could be seen on two garden pavilions (Colvin, The History 3: 313). Queen Elizabeth’s father, King Henry VIII, was equally architecturally framed and frozen with dates and a reference to his person by means of his monogram, name, and other royal signifiers.