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Image, identity and allusion: the Ridley monuments in St. Nicholas Cathedral, Newcastle upon Tyne

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In his article "National society, communal culture" Dror Wahrman (1992) suggested that the eighteenth century British elite had a choice 'between a 'national society and an alternative communal-provincial culture'. Through the Ridleys' funeral monuments it will be suggested that this was not a case of either national culture or provincial culture and that the Georgian elite were keen to demonstrate identities formed from provincial, national and indeed international sources.

The subjects of this paper are Matthew Ridley (1712 to 1778) and his son Sir Matthew White Ridley (1746 to 1813). The Ridley family has been active in the economic, political and social life of the North East for over three hundred years. The family gained wealth through commerce in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, acquired land and played a major role in developing the coal and salt trades and provincial banking. They owned estates at Heaton near Newcastle and in the mid-eighteenth century married into their relatives the Whites of Blagdon Hall in Northumberland, which remains the family's principal residence to this day (*Access to Archives*, 2008). The inscriptions on their monuments relate that both men served as MPs for Newcastle in several Parliaments, were members of the civic oligarchy serving as Mayors of the town, Governors of its Merchant Adventurers Company and held judicial and military appointments. Both were among the most prominent of the eighteenth century coal-barons whose economic power underpinned the industrial revolution. They were active patrons of what Borsay (1991) called the "urban renaissance" in the North East, subscribing to civic enhancements including the Newcastle Infirmary, the Assembly Rooms and the first Newcastle Theatre Royal. They employed fashionable architects to improve their houses and estates

as symbols of their culture and taste. And yet the identity they chose to present to future generations was neither regional nor national, but international. In their funerary monuments they are portrayed as Roman senators, surrounded by symbolism alluding to their accomplishments but also to a wider cultural identity as inheritors of the classical world reborn in Enlightenment Europe (figs.1 and 2). Why was this?

Fig.1 Matthew Ridley (1712-78)

Fig.2 Matthew White Ridley (1746-1813)

The funerary monuments are in St. Nicholas's Cathedral in Newcastle. This was the principal parish church of Newcastle and became a cathedral in 1882. In the eighteenth century an attempt was made to convert the rather dark and gloomy medieval interior into a cathedral. This involved whitewashing the interior and separating the nave and choir by a screen. The choir was controversially cleared of mediaeval monuments and fitted up with new communion table, pulpit and pews (Mackenzie, 1827). Sir Matthew White Ridley was among the most generous subscribers to this conversion work, giving £31, the second largest personal contribution (Northumberland Record Office: St. Nicholas Church). The nave became

the nearest thing in the North East to an elite necropolis, as large funerary monuments were erected to commemorate prominent locals. The two Ridley monuments are among the largest in the church. This appropriation of public religious space for elite memorials can be seen on a national level in Westminster Abbey and in St. Paul's Cathedral in London. It is important to note that the earlier monuments in St Nicholas's were not just moved; they were sold off as building rubble. The eighteenth century elite did not want any earlier heroes to detract from their achievements.

The monuments asserted the Ridleys' identities in this new elite space through text, symbolism and allusion to their immersion in national culture. Both monuments have long descriptions of the men's accomplishments in national politics, highlighting the family's national identity in their provincial heartland. The texts also establish the Ridleys' identity as members of the regional elite, serving as Mayors of Newcastle and their leadership of the prestigious and influential Merchant Venturers Company. They were full participants in the proud civic culture of Newcastle noted by Pamela Graves (2003) and Keith Wrightson (2007).

Both monuments are loaded with symbolism. Their Judicial identities are denoted by the curile chair, the scales of justice and the fasces as symbols of the men's service as magistrates.

Fig.3 and 4 Symbols of magistracy on Matthew Ridley (left) and Matthew White Ridley (right) monuments

Both memorials boast of the men's military identities. The large medallion beneath Matthew Ridley's monument (fig.5) recalls his role as Mayor in

1745 when Newcastle was fortified to resist the Jacobite invasion. Eneas Mackenzie (1827) described the symbolism:

> The base of the monument is formed by a medallion, on which the town of Newcastle is represented by a female figure, crowned with turrets, having a shield by her, bearing the arms of the town; attacked by Rebellion, who, treading on the crown and sceptre (ensigns of royalty), who bears in one hand the torch of sedition, in the other the sword of destruction. In an attitude of supplication, she inclines herself towards an armed figure, who protects her with his shield, and with a sword in his right hand resists the figure of Rebellion. On the defender's shield are represented the arms of the family of Ridley. As a finishing, under the medallion two cornucopias are introduced, representing the general effect of plenty (attendant on the care of active magistrates), connected by a civic crown, the reward amongst the Romans of civil virtue. On the foot of it is engraved the motto, 'Constans Fidei.'

Fig.5 Medallion below Matthew Ridley's monument

Fig.6 military standard on Sir Matthew's monument

Matthew Ridley thus identified his political allegiance to the Hanoverian government. Similarly, the military standard, shield and helmet of Sir Matthew White Ridley (fig.6) denote his service as a Colonel in a Newcastle regiment raised to defend the country against the Napoleonic threat.

Sir Matthew also commissioned the architect William Newton to add a castellated Gothic façade to his Queen Anne mansion at Heaton (fig.7).

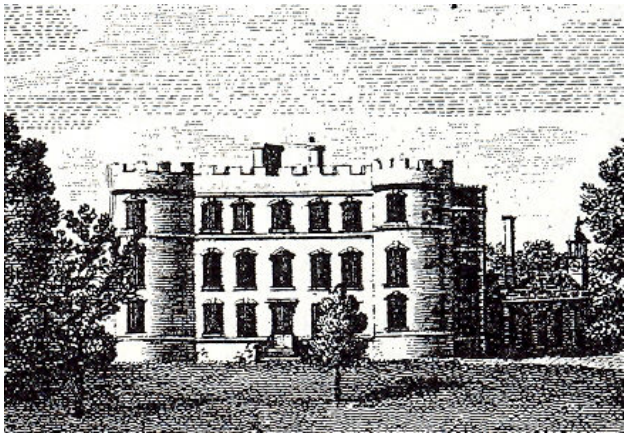

Fig.7 Heaton Hall, Northumberland

The Gothic style has sometimes been portrayed as a poor second to the prevailing Palladian architecture of the eighteenth century. Faulkner and Lowery (1996, p.21) described the Ridley's Heaton Hall as "pastry-cook Gothic", and it clearly was not a genuine medieval building. So why did Matthew Ridley, with his metropolitan taste and wealth, want such an appearance? The answer is that Heaton Hall, and the castles on his shield and his son's standard, allude to the role of the land-owning elite as guardians of the Border against Scottish invasions in the Middle Ages. Gothic buildings also gave the impression that their owners were long-established in the area, rather than nouveau riche. Many castellated Gothic houses were constructed in eighteenth century Britain. Unlike the Scottish castles of Robert Adam, where any medieval work was removed or completely hidden in his own designs, in Northumberland and Durham genuine medieval castles and towers were refurbished and extended, as at Alnwick Castle and Craster Tower. The Ridleys did not own a medieval castle, so battlemented towers were added to their house at Heaton as symbols of the father's defence of the nation against Jacobite invasions and alluding to the local military heritage and historical expectations of martial leadership by land-owners. The copy of Magna Carta, at Sir Matthew's feet, also recalls the role of the land-owning elite in restraining royal power and guardians of British Liberty.

Both monuments were carved not by local craftsmen but by London sculptors and shipped to Newcastle, symbols of the Ridley's wealth and

metropolitan taste. John Bacon, who produced Matthew Ridley's monument, was a Royal Academician responsible for statues of King George III and William Pitt the elder (Steggles, 2008). John Flaxman, who made the monument for Sir Matthew White Ridley, was the leading Neo-classical sculptor in late eighteenth-century Britain, first Professor of Sculpture at the Royal Academy and sculptor of major national figures including Lord Nelson and Robert Burns (Symmons, 2008). The monuments are therefore assertions of the Ridleys' national cultural identity intended to impress their provincial viewers.

There are some major omissions from the monuments. Unlike many contemporary monuments in the church neither of the Ridley memorials has any mention of their wives and families. In the case of the father, his marriage to Elizabeth White was most advantageous as it brought him that family's estate at Blagdon and lands at Blyth which he and his son developed as a major coal-port. Perhaps they believed that details of the bereaved family would detract from the intensely masculine imagery portrayed by the monuments. Nor is there any mention of Matthew Ridley's service as the first Provincial Grand Master for Northumberland between 1734 and 1771 (*Freemasonry in Northumberland*, 2007).

The most striking omission is that neither monument, although placed in a church, has any mention of or symbolism denoting the men's religion. Although many other monuments of the eighteenth century focus on classical motifs, they often include some mention of Christian piety. For example, the memorial to Henry Askew (died 1796) is also classical, but includes among its symbolism the pelican feeding her young with her own blood, a traditional symbol of Christ's sacrifice. The rather dramatic memorial to Claverly Bewicke (died 1815) includes an angel bearing a scroll with the Beatitude "Blessed are they that mourn, for they shall be comforted". William Peareth's monument of 1810 mentions his adherence to the Christian faith. It is clear that contemporaries wished their Christian faith to be represented on their monuments, but all suggestion of religious identity is absent from the two Ridley monuments. It is as though they wished to be seen not in a Christian church in Newcastle but alongside the Appian Way leading to Rome.

The most striking feature of the Ridley monuments is their apparel. The depiction as Roman senators shows these monuments to be part of the fashion noted by Philip Ayres (1997) for the eighteenth century British elite to identify themselves with the cultural, philosophical and political values of the Roman republic. It must be recalled that a gentlemen's education placed knowledge of classical Greek and Roman culture way before knowledge of the lives of the majority of their fellow Britons. This classical education was reinforced by direct contact with the remains of ancient

Rome during the Grand Tour, seen as an essential part of elite educational achievement. The ancient Roman senate was seen as an ideal political system to be reborn in eighteenth century Britain, with the land-owning oligarchy holding power and guarding the rights of Britons, i.e. themselves, against any over-bearing monarchs. Land-owner power had brought about the Magna Carta as guarantor of their rights and had overthrown two over-mighty Stuart kings in the seventeenth century. The limited franchise of Parliament also precluded popular infringements of elite power, just as the Roman Senate had opposed populist leaders such as Julius Caesar. The depiction of the Ridleys in this senatorial garb thus asserts their identities as members of the international philosophy seeking to recreate the classical world in Enlightenment Europe.

Fig.8 Blagdon Hall, Northumberland

The Ridleys' house at Blagdon (fig.8) was also refurbished to identify their classical credentials. It was extended in Palladian style between 1752 and 1757, as it was believed that the designs of Palladio were based upon real Roman buildings. In 1778 some interior rooms were remodeled to the more correctly neo-classical designs of James Wyatt, a demonstration of the Ridleys' national connections and awareness of the latest metropolitan taste (Northumberland Record Office: Ridley (Blagdon) collection).

The Roman allusions of the Ridley monuments also appealed to local identities being fostered in contemporary historical works by Bourne (1736), Hutchinson (1776) and Brand (1789) which alerted eighteenth century

gentlemen to the Roman heritage of the North East. Bourne compared the waggonways of the Tyneside coal-industry, in which the Ridleys were major stakeholders, with the roads that carried Roman values across Europe. Many families, including the Ridleys, supported the flourishing interest in Roman antiquities. For the land-owners of Tyneside, that most spectacular assertion of Roman influence in Britain, Hadrian's Wall, ran through their gardens. They saw themselves as the landed and spiritual descendants of the legions that had held barbarism at bay. Richard Hingley (2008) noted the suggestion after the 1745 Jacobite Rebellion that a new Hadrian's Wall should be built to thwart any future invasion. The Ridleys sought in their monuments to identify themselves as part of this historic bulwark against invasion.

In conclusion, the example of the eighteenth century Ridleys contradicts Wahrman's claim that the eighteenth century British elite had to choose between national or local cultures. Rather they were determined that their monuments would demonstrate to we future observers their pride in their local, national and indeed their international identity.

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