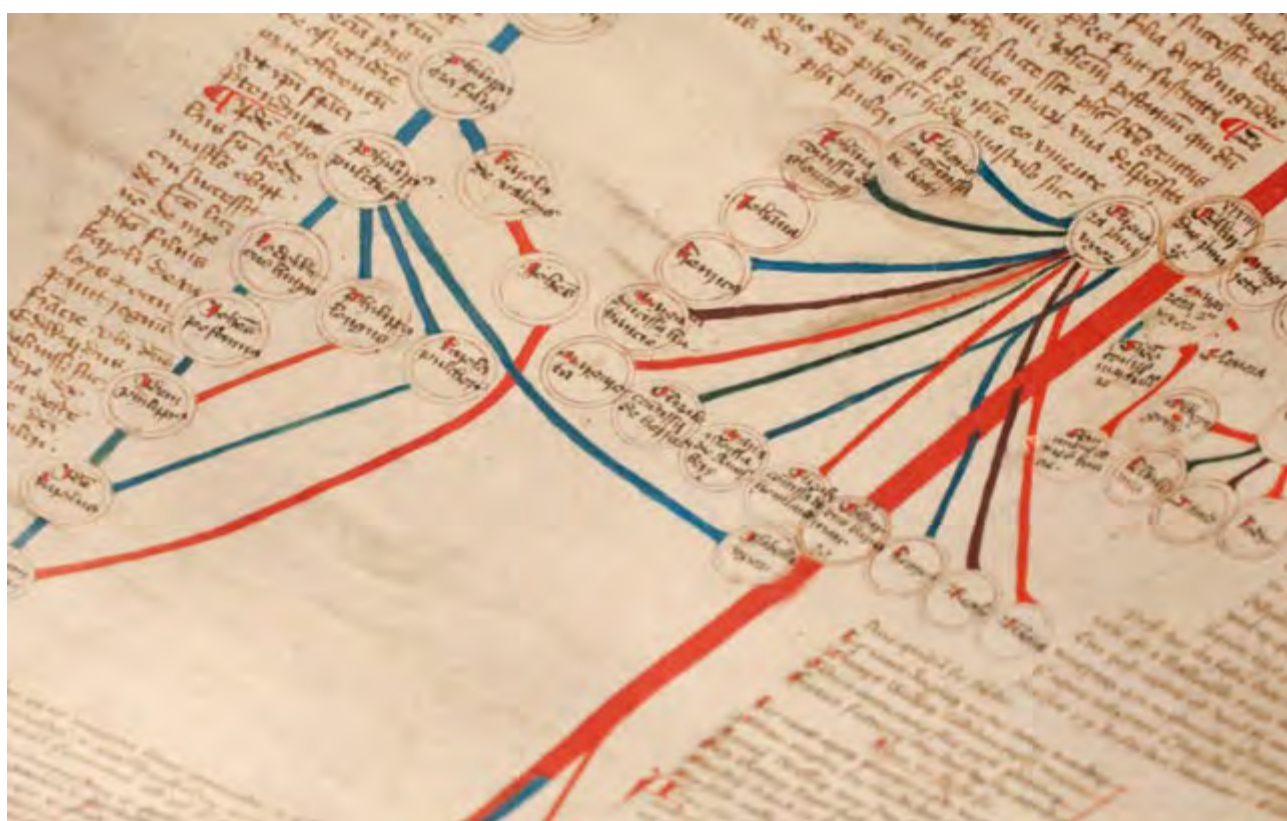| CANTERBURY ROLL WORKING PAPERS	WORKING PAPER 1
SUBJECT | KAUPAPA:	Another Role for the Canterbury Roll? Table Linen in the Fifteenth Century
DATE | RĀ:	12 October 2021; final version approved 13 November 2021
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Image: The Canterbury Roll © University of Canterbury

While it is widely held by medieval scholars that the Canterbury Roll was used to bolster the claims of Henry VI and Edward IV to the English crown,[1] the dimensions of the parchment itself (33.4 x 489 cm) suggest an intriguing new theory as to its use. A fifteenth-century banquet trestle table could measure from sixty-six centimetres to one metre wide;[2] thus the Canterbury Roll might cover roughly a third of the table's width. It therefore seems plausible that the Roll could have been laid out upon a table-top during a royal banquet in the same manner as a table runner, partly as decoration, partly as propaganda for Henry or Edward's fellow diners.

Records of household goods from fifteenth-century France list *longerias* among collections of table linen, such as the inventory of Anthonius Robaudi of Marseille (1422):[3] "Item quinque mapas et quatuor longerias antiquas sive usitatas florenorum ii" (Next, five tablecloths and

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[1] Chris Jones, "The Canterbury Roll." In *Treasures of the University of Canterbury Library*, edited by Chris Jones and Bronwyn Matthews with Jennifer Clement (Christchurch: Canterbury University Press, 2011), 85; Chris Jones, Chris Thomson, Maree Shirota, Elisabeth Rolston, Thandi Parker, and Jennifer Middendorf, ed., "The Canterbury Roll – A Digital Edition," *The Canterbury Roll Project* (Christchurch: Canterbury University Press, 2017), https://www.canterbury.ac.nz/canterburyroll.

[2] Nicholas Berry, "A Study of Period Dining Tables - Height & Width," *Early Oak Reproductions*, n.d., https://www.earlyoakreproductions.co.uk/news-blog/oak-furniture-history/news-blog-5251-period-tables-height-width.php.

[3] Daniel Lord Smail, *Legal Plunder: Households and Debt Collection in Late Medieval Europe* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016), 38.

four *longerias*, ancient or worn, 2 florins).[4] Daniel Smail loosely translates *longeria* as "table runner," while admitting that dictionaries for fifteenth-century European terminology vary in their definitions: from a long, narrow tablecloth, to a supplementary tablecloth which lay over the main cloth and "serve[d] as a kind of napkin, ie diners could wipe their hands on it."[5] These records do not mention whether *longerias* were also used in noble or royal English households before, or during, Henry VI's reign. Given the level of cultural exchange between the French and English courts before the Wars of the Roses,[6] however, it is probable that French table coverings, particularly the more ornamental kind, were copied by English seamstresses, or vice versa.

Tablecloths – cloths covering the entire table-top and draping towards the floor – were certainly in use in fifteenth-century England. Tablecloths have many different names in fourteenth- and fifteenth-century records, but the most relevant term here is "nape," from which we gain the word "napery," derived in turn from *nappe*, an Old French word for a tablecloth.[7] More than one cloth might be used on a single table, depending on its size. *The*

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[4] Daniel Lord Smail, ed., "Inventory of Anthonius Robaudi." In *DALME: The Documentary Archaeology of Late Medieval Europe*, edited by D. L. Smail, G. H. Pizzorno, and L. Morreale (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, 2021), https://dalme.org/collections/estimates/records/2e6f669c-d515-4a68-a686-1a80c37b9e5d/31r/.

[5] Daniel Lord Smail, "Textile research question." Personal correspondence via email to Damon Daines, October 16, 2021.

[6] Martina Häcker, "French-English Linguistic and Cultural Contact in Medieval England: The Evidence of Letters," *Arbeiten aus Anglistik und Amerikanistik* 36, no. 2 (2011): 139.

[7] "Nappe." *Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary*. Merriam-Webster, 2021, https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/nappe.

Book of Keruynge (1413) refers to tablecloths consisting of three long, overlapping strips.[8]

These cloths tended to be plain, however, as they were often covered by other napery during

the meal, particularly the surnape and the savenap (see below). Embroidered textiles called

table carpets were also in use, which covered the entire table-top, although these were

usually removed when the table was used for dining, or covered by a tablecloth.[9]

A record of a lawsuit in London from 1367 lists a number of household items already received

by the plaintiff as payment, which includes "11 savenaps and surnaps" valued at 12*d*. in

total.[10] The surnape was intended to cover the nape (tablecloth) during handwashing. "A king

as well as his guests might wash their hands in between courses, as well as before and after

the meal," says Amanda Mikolic, curatorial assistant for the Department of Medieval Art at

the Cleveland Museum of Art in Ohio. "How often washing was needed would depend on the

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[8] "Wynkyn de Worde's Boke of Keruynge." In *The Babees Book*, edited by Frederick J. Furnivall (Early English Text Society: London, 1868), 268.

[9] C. M. Woolgar, *The Culture of Food in England 1200-1500* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016), 192-93; Gillian Vogelsang-Eastwood, "Table Carpet." In *TRC Needles. The TRC Digital Encyclopaedia of Decorative Needlework*, edited by Gillian Vogelsang-Eastwood (Textile Research Centre. Leiden, 2017), https://trc-leiden.nl/trc-needles/individual-textiles-and-textile-types/furnishings/table-carpet?fbclid=IwAR2jCq8wE4IJg9TYy52NmtzstHlcYRaatsHf6iJjA6mBko6ndj0d29rJOQI.

[10] "Roll A 12: 1366-67." In *Calendar of the Plea and Memoranda Rolls of the City of London: Volume 2, 1364-1381*, edited by A. H. Thomas (His Majesty's Stationery Office: London, 1929), 65-83, https://www.british-history.ac.uk/plea-memoranda-rolls/vol2/pp65-83.

occasion, as well as the menu."[11] Edward IV's Black Book of 1478 confirms this with a description of the "Offyce of Ewary and Napry," a servant whose duty it was: "to serue the kynges persone […] with clene basons and moste pure waters, asseyde as oftin as his moste royall person shal be seruyd."[12]

A surnape for royalty would be made of linen,[13] and, from the descriptions given of its use, measure longer than the banquet table. Henry VII's articles for the regulation of his household (1494) set out in detail how the servants should conduct themselves while the King washed his hands.[14] The sewer (a high ranking household officer) and a gentleman usher brought the surnape and an equally long linen damask "towel" from a nearby table, carefully layered and folded together in a concertina. The usher also carried a rod, which he used to draw the folded cloths along the length of the table from right to left, remembering to reverence to the King whenever he passed in front of him. The sewer and the usher stretched the cloths taut between them, then the usher would "make an estate" by pulling the surnape and towel into a loose pleat on both sides of the King's place setting, ensuring that the rest of the cloth

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[11] Amanda Mikolic, "Medieval handwashing." Personal correspondence via email to Claire Daines, August 25, 2021.

[12] "The Black Book of the Household of Edward IV." In *The Household of Edward IV: The Black Book and the Ordinance of 1478*, edited by Alec Reginald Myers (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1959), 192.

[13] Woolgar, *The Culture of Food in England,* 192.

[14] "Articles Ordained by Henry VII for the Regulation of His Household." In *Liber Quotidianus Contrarotulatoris Garderobae*, edited by John Topham (Society of Antiquaries of London: London, 1787), 119.

remained smooth. Once the King had washed and dried his hands on the towel, the usher

inserted his rod back into the end of the double cloths, drawing them towards the centre of

the table while the sewer did the same at the other end, then returned the cloths to the ewery

table.

The savenap was also intended to protect the undercloth, but from food and wine stains

during courses.[15] The online *Dictionary of the Scots Language* documents a wide variety of

spellings during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries;[16] all are derived from *sauver* (French

for "to save") + "nap". Its purpose and position on the table indicates that this particular piece

of napery would require the most laundering, regardless of the type of material used, or how

much care the diners took. The Canterbury Roll, on the other hand, is made of sheep's-hide

parchment that remains extremely oily to the touch. If Henry VI or Edward IV did use the Roll

as decoration during a banquet, wiping the surface clean afterwards might not have been an

issue.

Banquet scenes often appear in illuminations in medieval texts. No narrow, decorative

centrepieces appear in these, although there are plenty of examples of savenaps, often

depicted as smooth, plain, and white beneath the dishes, with the hanging undercloth (if

shown) painted as a separate patterned cloth, or hanging in pleats or folds if plain. See, for

example, a scene of the Last Supper (bas-de-page) in the fourteenth-century "Taymouth

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[15] Woolgar, *The Culture of Food in England*, 192.

[16] "Savenap n." *Dictionary of the Scots Language*. 2004. Scottish Language Dictionaries Ltd. Dictionaries of the Scots Language, https://dsl.ac.uk/entry/dost/savenap.

Hours."[17] However, the absence of table runners does not prove conclusively that they were not used; it could simply mean that medieval scribes used artistic licence, leaving them out of the illustrations to keep the table-top from looking too crowded. We can see in the illumination of Geoffrey Luttrell with his family at dinner from the Luttrell Psalter (before 1340) that the scribe has simplified the illustration by leaving out the diners' legs and feet, which ought to be visible due to the absence of an undercloth.[18]

Given the available evidence, it cannot be proved conclusively that the Canterbury Roll was used as a table decoration during Henry or Edward's reign, but neither has sufficient evidence been found to prove that it was *not* used in this way. A decorative accompaniment to banquets remains, therefore, one possible use for the Roll.

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[17] London, British Library, Yates Thompson MS 13, fol. 116ᵛ (Book of Hours, Use of Sarum, 2ⁿᵈ ¼ 14ᵗʰ c.), http://www.bl.uk/manuscripts/Viewer.aspx?ref=yates_thompson_ms_13_f116v.

[18] A feasting scene at a table (bas-de-page), London, British Library, Add MS 42130, fol. 208ʳ ("The Luttrell Psalter," 1325-1340), http://www.bl.uk/manuscripts/Viewer.aspx?ref=add_ms_42130_f208r.

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