

## Research Notes and Queries

### The Examination Skeletal Remains: Henry VI and the 'Princes'

Muriel Smith writes:—

Mr. W. J. White, in his article on Henry VI in September's *Ricardian*, appears to accept that Henry's remains were at some time put straight into earth (p.76). By what I could make out when researching my *Ricardian* article which Mr. White was kind enough to cite, the burial in the earth idea was mere conjecture, the anatomist in 1910 trying to account for animal bones included with Henry's—a pig's forefoot if I remember rightly.

If Henry's body was whole when exhumed at Chertsey in 1484, evidently the flesh fell to dust after a short exposure to air. It looks as if somebody then, coveting Henry's hand for a relic, substituted the bones of a pig's foot. At any rate, there is no firm evidence for burial uncoffined any more than for blood matting the hair. As Mr. White says (p.75) this was a mere assertion of St. John Hope's: the hair was matted with what could have been blood but no test of its nature was made.

Altogether the exhumation of 1910 was made in the most amateurish fashion. St. John Hope listed a large team, superficially impressive, which on inspection proved to consist almost entirely of distinguished persons invited to watch: the only scientist, the Cambridge Professor of Anatomy, had no competence in forensic medicine. That is perfectly plain: the bones of the head, he said, were much broken, but never a word of whether or not the damage occurred in life and could have been the cause of death. Any pathologist would raise this vital question even if obliged to say that he could not tell. As the exhumation of a possible murder victim the thing was lamentable: one has only to compare it with the investigation that same year of the remains of Mrs. Crippen.

W. J. White writes:—

That Henry's body was interred directly in earth may indeed be merely conjecture by Professor MacAlister, the anatomist who examined the skeleton. His report, as quoted by Hope, made no mention of residual soil adhering to the bones as one encounters in skeletal remains excavated from earth graves. Such considerations may have gone without saying for he was

at pains to account for the observed dismemberment necessary to fit the body into so small an ossuary and for the intrusive presence of the humerus of a pig.

It is true that the spontaneous decomposition of intact ancient corpses upon exposure to the atmosphere is a well-known phenomenon. Were this the case with Henry's body, however, then Rous is guilty of suppression of this unpalatable sequel to the discovery of the 'miraculously' incorrupt corpse. Certainly anyone who has braved such exhumations would agree wryly with Rous' description of the state of the cadaver as '*valde odoriferum*' (John Rous, *Historia Regum Angliae*, ed. Thomas Hearne, Oxford 1745, p.217)!

The surreptitious purloining of one of Henry's hands at his disinterment is an over-simplification of the apparent deficit: the bones of the entire right arm were missing. This fact, taken together with the presumed substitution of the fore-leg of a pig, has led one writer to claim that the monks of Chertsey were selling off Henry's body, piecemeal, as relics and that Richard's removal of the remains to Windsor put an end to this unsavoury trade (Mary Clive, *This Sun of York*, London 1973, p.186). Henry's broken skull in the hands of forensic pathologists may or may not have produced a verdict as to cause of death. MacAlister's refusal to commit himself upon the poor evidence before him is praiseworthy. It is all very well to attempt to make dry bones speak but quite another thing to put words into their mouths as was done to the skeletons ascribed to the sons of Edward IV (L. E. Tanner and W. Wright, Recent investigations regarding the Princes in the Tower, *Archaeologia*, vol. 34, 1934, pp.1-26).

Forensic scientists were conspicuously absent also from the panel of experts to whom Professor Charles Ross referred the Tanner and Wright paper for re-appraisal (*Richard III*, London 1981, Appendix 1: 'On the bones of 1674'). Although not intended to be a conventional treatment the latter work is conformist in the sense that, following the examples set by Lindsay, Kendall and Myers (and now obligatory in a biography of Richard?), a specialist assessment of the bones is provided. Expectations may have been raised, therefore, that—almost fifty years after the first scientific examination of the skeletons—a fresh approach to the problem would emerge. Instead the Appendix on the 'Bones' appears to raise more questions than it seeks to answer, leaving the false impression that scientific advances made in the interim can improve little upon the 1933 enquiry (Anne Sutton and P. W. Hammond, Review article: Richard III by Charles Ross, *The Ricardian*, vol. 6, No. 76, 1982, pp.22-26). Interestingly, although the age-estimate for the younger child receives the generous margin for error consistent with modern thinking (the permissible age-range having increased to 7 to 11½ years at death from 9 to 11, Tanner and Wright, p.17), that for the elder is quoted with greater precision and the evidence of the axis (second cervical vertebra, *ibid.*, p.16) is considered 'convincing' (Ross, Appendix 1, pp.233-4). The latter will puzzle those who have noted the failure of an earlier generation of specialists to reach agreement on this matter (P. M. Kendall, *Richard the Third*, London 1955, pp.497-8) and/or

have consulted more recent works (W. M. Krogman, *The Human Skeleton in Forensic Medicine*, Springfield 1962, p.52; *Gray's Anatomy*, 36th edition 1980, p.283).

There is, moreover, no response to the challenge of the bone lengths and height-estimates quoted by Professor Wright (Tanner & Wright, pp.23-24; cf. P. Lindsay, *On Some Bones in Westminster Abbey*, 1934, reprint Bath 1969, pp.30-32), and discussed by Dr. Richard Lyne-Pirkis in a lecture to the Society in 1963 (Secretary's Report, *Ricardian* no. 6, 1963, p.7, and as reported in Audrey Williamson, *The Mystery of the Princes*, Gloucester 1978, pp.187-190). Similarly the data on the skeleton of Anne Mowbray (d.1481; exhumed 1965) are not considered, the evidence for the close family relationship of the two individuals being rejected (cf. Dr. Marjorie Weeks in Research Notes and Queries, *Ricardian* vol. 4, no. 53, 1976, p.30). Likewise the evidence for violent death is dismissed out of hand (Tanner and Wright, pp.18-19; Ross, p.234). Forensic medical advice would have been welcome here. Despite this catalogue of lost opportunities work is in progress to rectify some of the deficiencies in time for the 1984 Symposium.

Professor Ross has performed a service, however, in consulting the anthropologist Dr. Juliet Rogers who, alone of his trio of experts, disputes the identity of the remains. Dr. Rogers points out a major deficiency of the 1933 investigation: that sex is indeterminable (*without a fresh investigation* one should add, Sutton and Hammond, p.25). Furthermore she challenges the *terminus a quo* for the remains: the belief that the bones can be no older than the White Tower itself (Ross, p.233). Indeed, although no reference is cited, Ross himself mentions a recent theory that the skeletons are of Roman children (*ibid.*, p.98), and despite his scepticism there is much to commend it. Thus, the White Tower was not an archetypical Norman castle keep in that it never stood on a mound. The bones were excavated from the foot of a stairway which gave access to a door fourteen feet up in the south wall of the White Tower (Tanner & Wright), pp.10-11, this doorway being re-opened, coincidentally, exactly 300 years after the discovery of the 'Princes'!), and thus some distance out from this wall—clear of the foundations of the keep. The staircase possibly lay over the Roman building found sixteen feet from this wall in 1899 (G. Parnell, *Tower of London: the Inmost Ward excavation 1979*, *The London Archaeologist* vol. 4, no. 3, 1981, pp.69-73), and account should be taken of the known Romano-British propensity for providing human foundation-sacrifices (cf. Lindsay, pp.40-41). This, taken in conjunction with the finding of the burial of a prehistoric adolescent male at the Tower (G. Parnell, *Excavations at the Tower of London, 1976-7*, *London Archaeologist* vol. 3, no. 4, 1977, p.97), is emphasised in anticipation of an uproar should carbon-14 dating render the skeletons older by a thousand years than presumed hitherto.

Charles Ross concludes that since medical science has proved incapable of resolving the problems of the bones' identity this is once more the province of the historian. One might add that many fields of science have yet to be brought to bear upon the question of the bones of the 'Princes' and that science alone has the power to disprove their spurious identification.