

How Posterity Beheaded Morton: the Case of the Missing Head

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STONYHURST COLLEGE, a famous Roman Catholic school in Lancashire, has a skull which is reputed to be that of Cardinal John Morton who as Bishop of Ely was Richard III's great enemy. Last year the College decided to have the skull analysed by Professor A. Busuttil, Regius Professor of Forensic Science at Edinburgh University, in order to establish whether indeed the tradition might be true and if so, whether the skull should be sent for burial to Canterbury Cathedral.¹ The result of the report has not been able to establish that the skull is unquestionably Morton's but it is worthwhile examining Professor Busuttil's conclusions together with the tradition surrounding Stonyhurst's strange acquisition and the information available concerning Morton's tomb.

Professor Busuttil carried out a thorough examination of the cranium and mandible as well as chemical analysis of tiny portions of the skull for nitrogen content and amino acid concentration. The nitrogen method had been pioneered by Professor Bernard Knight of Cardiff University while the amino acid analysis was part of studies being carried out by Professor Busuttil's department at Edinburgh.² Radiocarbon dating was not used. In his unpublished report, Professor Busuttil stated:

No specific or characteristic anomalies or peculiarities, of either traumatic or congenital origin, that would have been expressed as specific features in the physiognomy of this man, could be identified in the bones. No pathological abnormalities due to disease processes are present.³

The results of the examination and analysis led Professor Busuttil to the conclusion that the skull was of 'an elderly well-nourished adult Caucasian male who died about five centuries ago'.⁴ The condition of the teeth and jaws indicated that 'the person was well-nourished, and not suffering from protein or vitamin deficiency' and, therefore it was 'likely that he lived in the higher socio-economic strata of his society'.⁵ This would support the tradition surrounding the skull that it was indeed Cardinal Morton's.

The examination was unable to establish the exact age of the skull at the time of death. '[T]he absence of any osteoporosis or osteoarthritis in the temporomandibular joint sockets' implied to Professor Busuttil that the man was not older than sixty-five or seventy years old when he died.⁶ He considered that it was

unusual for a man to survive to that age particularly in that period without developing either osteoporosis or osteoarthritis.⁷ Morton was reputed to be in his late seventies or eighties when he died on 15 September 1500 at Knoles.⁸ It is unlikely that a man of his upbringing, education and intelligence would be either unaware of his own age or have any motive to lie about his advancing years since old age attracted veneration rather than condemnation from his contemporaries.

Establishing Morton's exact age in 1500 is difficult. There does not seem to be any evidence of his year of birth. He was the son of Richard Morton of Milborne St Andrew and was born in Dorset (the family originally came from Nottinghamshire) either at Bere Regis or Milborne St Andrew. He was educated at Cerne Abbey in Dorset and from there he went to Balliol College, Oxford, but there appears to be no documentation to corroborate these statements. By 1448 Morton was a Bachelor of Civil Law at Oxford and a fellow of Peckwater Inn in June 1448.⁹ Assuming that he had spent some time at Oxford before 1446 as an undergraduate, he must have been born prior to 1430. This would mean that he was definitely in his seventies when he died in 1500. The absence of a specific birthdate, therefore, tends to support the evidence that the skull could indeed be Morton's.

As heads of cardinal archbishops are rarely to be found outside their tombs, the fact that Morton's head was definitely removed from his grave does support the tradition surrounding the Stonyhurst skull and is worth mentioning at this point. After a lavish funeral, Morton was interred before the altar of Our Lady in the Crypt of Canterbury Cathedral. An elaborate tomb was erected in the main cathedral but remained empty. Morton's posthumous problems began during the Civil War when Roundhead soldiers removed all the brass plates in the cathedral for recycling as munitions. Although Morton seems to have requested a simple marble slab for his gravestone,¹⁰ it is likely that a commemorative brass plate may have been laid across the marble since there is indeed an indent for a plate.¹¹ With nothing to protect it, the marble slab began to crack badly, revealing the archbishop's shallowly deposited remains. By 1670 most of the bones had been pilfered and Ralph Sheldon, the nephew of the archbishop at that time, suggested to his uncle that it might be wise to remove the head and remaining graveclothes for safe-keeping. The archbishop agreed and Sheldon placed Morton's head in a lead box and kept it as a curiosity.¹² When Sheldon died in 1684, all his possessions, including Morton's head, passed to his niece, Frances Sheldon, one of the maids of honour to Charles II's Queen, Catherine of Braganza.

Stonyhurst College's acquisition of the skull is not documented but the history of the school itself lends some veracity to the tradition that the skull is Morton's. In 1593 a group of Jesuit priests set up a college at St Omer to provide an education for English Roman Catholics. Two hundred years later, threatened by the advancing troops of the French revolutionary army, the college which was by then based in Liège had to evacuate and was offered new premises in England. The benefactor was an old boy of the college, Thomas Weld of Lulworth in Dorset, whose family had inherited an Elizabethan mansion at Stonyhurst in Lancashire some fifty years before. The Welds had never made personal use of the mansion and eventually they made a gift of it to the college.¹³ The Sheldon family had sent their sons to the Jesuit college at St Omer and it may well be that a

member of this family presented the skull to the school since the College already had a valuable collection of books and other treasures, including a work of William Caxton, Froissart's Chronicles, Thomas More's Order of the Garter cap, a book of hours belonging to Mary, Queen of Scots, and a seventh century Gospel of St John from the coffin of St Cuthbert.¹⁴ If the skull is not the archbishop's, then whose is it and why was it placed among the treasures of Stonyhurst and not buried?

Without any other collaborative documentation, the identity of the skull is dependent upon the results of the forensic investigation. How accurately can age be assessed by such means? Professor Busuttil states that previous work of a similar nature had been done only with skulls which had been exhumed after a far longer time in the grave and had been in a far worse condition:

In this particular instance it is known that these bones had not been interred and therefore not subjected to the erosive properties of soil and moisture for the entire time since death. This could introduce a certain amount of artefact as all the previous studies of this type were largely carried out on bones permanently interred during the 'post-mortem' interval. These studies however tend to strongly suggest that the bones belong to a person who lived 450-500 years ago. Those analyses, routinely used in similar instances, cannot be more accurate.¹⁵

Stonyhurst College is now faced with a dilemma and the Reverend O'Halloran would welcome some intelligent debate on the future of this gruesome heirloom. If the skull is truly Morton's, the College feels it should be returned to Canterbury Cathedral. Ricardians will probably feel that if Richard III's bones finally lie ignominiously beneath a municipal carpark in Leicester, it is posterity's justice that his enemy's head should continue to sit in a cupboard in Lancashire. Yet since whoever fleshed out the skull in life did not request, like Jeremy Bentham, a continued public exposure after death, perhaps a quiet grave at Stonyhurst with a plaque mentioning the tradition might be an acceptable compromise.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Correspondence from Reverend Michael O'Halloran 1991.

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2. Correspondence, Professor A. Busuttil, 25 March 1992.
3. A. Busuttil, A Report on Skull from Stonyhurst College, unpublished, 1991, p.2.
4. Busuttil, p.3.
5. Busuttil, p.2.
6. Busuttil, p.3.
7. Correspondence, Professor A. Busuttil, 25 March 1992.

8. Notes of the Rev. Dowland accompanying the manuscript of John Budden on Cardinal John Morton. Dorset Record Office, Trenchard Collection Mss. D-TRD/F48. See also J. C. Mansel-Pleydell, A Biographical Sketch of Cardinal Morton, *Dorset Natural History and Archaeological Society Journal*, vol. 3 (1879), pp.49-73. Mansel-Pleydell in his introduction to Budden's manuscript states that Morton died 'much broken by age and infirmities, after a lingering illness'. This disagrees with Professor Busuttil's conclusion on the owner of the skull's general health. Budden's manuscript, however, quotes Morton's last will and testament which he made 'when this mortality was to be put off'. It reads: 'I, John Morton, of sound memory and in health, thanks be to God, both of body and minde, meaditating wth myselfe that there is a necessitie of diing imposed upon all men, and that ther is nothing soe certaine; nor uncertaine as the manner and the time.' A. B. Emden, *Biographical Register of the University of Cambridge to 1500*, Cambridge 1963, states that the will was dated as 15 June 1500 and proved on 22 October 1500. All this points to the fact that Morton's health was extremely good three months before he died. Certainly the image of Morton that comes through in More's *Utopia* is of a man of great agile mentality and since More would have been only in his mid-teens when Morton died, it does not seem likely that Morton died of a lingering illness. Morton was also still Chancellor of England at his death on 15 September 1500. See S. B. Chrimes, *Henry VII*, London 1972, p.105.
9. Emden, *Cambridge* (see n.8).
10. J. C. Mansel-Pleydell, A Biographical Sketch, p.73.
11. Correspondence from Ms Anne Oakley, April 1991.
13. Correspondence, Reverend M. O'Halloran, 19 March 1992.
14. *The King's England: Lancashire*, ed., A. Mee, London 1936, pp.272-275.
15. Busuttil, Report, p.3.