

Research Notes and Queries

The *Divisie*-chronicle

Livia Visser-Fuchs writes:—

The Dutch *Divisie*-chronicle has been used as a source for near-contemporary, continental rumours about Richard III and the fate of the princes. (P. W. Hammond and Maaïke Lulofs, Richard III: Dutch sources, *The Ricardian*, vol. 3 no. 46, 1974, pp.12-3; this was used by Audrey Williamson, *The Mystery of the Princes*, Dursley 1987, p.132, and Isolde Wigram in her review of *Richard III and the Princes in the Tower*, by A. J. Pollard, Stroud 1991, in *The Ricardian*, vol. 9, no. 116, March 1992, p.217).

Quoting such a 'foreign' source without knowledge of its background entails the risk of vesting it with a spurious authority and an exaggerated aura of credibility. A brief discussion of the *Divisie*-chronicle and the author seems therefore opportune.

The book was composed very early in the sixteenth century by Cornelius, surnamed Gaudanus, Goudensis, Aurelius (all meaning 'of Gouda'; Latin *aurum* (gold) = Dutch *goud*), or 'of Lopsen', a regular canon of the Augustinian house of Lopsen, just outside Leiden. He was born c.1460 and may have been the illegitimate son of a priest, like Erasmus whom he knew in his youth.

Cornelius Aurelius went to school at Gouda and, later, at Deventer, where the spiritual climate was still greatly influenced by the *Devotio Moderna* but also open to humanist renewal. He studied at Cologne, Louvain and Paris (1477-85) and while at Cologne started composing religious poetry in Latin. Later he wrote saints' lives and political and historical works. In 1508/9 Emperor Maximilian sent him a laurel crown for his poetry, but it was the long history of Holland, written in the vernacular and said to be 'greater than the Iliad' by a friend, that guaranteed Aurelius a lasting—though anonymous—reputation. *Die Cronycke van Hollandt Zeelandt ende Vrieslant beghinnende van Adams tiden tot die geboorte ons heren Jhesu voertgaende tot den iare M.CCCCC ende XVII* (The Chronicle of Holland, Zeeland and Friesland, beginning at the time of Adam until the birth of our lord Jesus, and continued to the year 1517) was finished in 1517 and printed in the same year. The Leiden printer, Jans Seversz, had encouraged the making of the book and paid for its production. As a consequence the author's name does not appear at all on what was to become the standard history of the northern Low Countries for three centuries. Some of Aurelius' friends knew of his work—they were themselves engaged on similar but less ambitious projects—but he remained unknown to later generations and was not identified with certainty as the author until 1888.

The *Divisie*-chronicle was planned as a 'national' history, a cross between a world chronicle and a regional one. It was composed according to three schemes. First a division into three parts, inspired by the history of Holland: from the Creation to 863 (the end of the rule of the Roman emperors), 863-1433 (the independent county), 1433-1517 (Holland as part of the Burgundian/Habsburg empire). Secondly the book was divided into thirty-two *divisies* or divisions (hence the name usually given to it), and finally it was arranged according to chronological series of popes and emperors.

The book was thoroughly didactic. Aurelius used the vernacular to reach a lay public because, like all northern Dutch humanists, he was very concerned to teach and educate and used historical works to spread his ideas. He was the inventor of the 'Batavian myth': by making the *Batavi* — a proud, independent people that remained loyal to the Romans — the ancestors of the Dutch, he gave historical importance to *all* Hollanders, not merely to the counts, traditionally descended from the Trojans, or the towns, supposedly founded by the Trojans. Erasmus was one of the scholars who supported the myth and lent it prestige. The Batavians, according to Aurelius, had bestowed (or should have bestowed!) several virtues on their descendants: courage in war, a simple lifestyle and unity; their women were virtuous, their men good farmers and fishermen. It is not surprising that the *Divisie*-chronicle remained popular with Dutch historians and schoolmasters for centuries. It saw several redactions, some with continuations, and was last reprinted in 1802.

Aurelius used many sources, classical, early medieval and contemporary and mentioned most of them. Several strictly contemporary sources, however, are not mentioned by name, suggesting that he pretended to some originality. It is partly for that reason that we do not know where he gained his knowledge of English events. He was certainly no better informed than others and his story of Richard III kissing the heart of Buckingham after it had been cut out, shows he was as uncritical as the worst of his colleagues. As a local he knew some details of the exiled Edward IV's progress through Holland, but these are shared, for instance, by Jan van Naaldwijk, and there is nothing unique about his account of Edward's return or the reign of Richard III.

As far as the authority or bias of the *Divisie*-chronicle on Richard III is concerned, it has to be remembered that Aurelius enjoyed another stay in Paris, from October 1497 to August 1498, which had a profound effect on his work. It is likely that his historical interests were first awakened during this period and he spent part of his time making notes from books available to him in Paris. Even more important is the fact that he became a member of the learned circle led by Robert Gaguin, the well-known historian whose first studies had been paid for by Isabel of Portugal, Duchess of Burgundy, the mother-in-law of Margaret of York, but who had become wholly French and considered the English a perfidious race. This literary circle included Domenico Mancini, who had written his *De occupatione Regni Anglie per Ricardum tertium libellus* six years earlier after he had, as he himself said, 'gone over' it several times in the presence of others; Guillaume de Rochefort, chancellor of Paris, who, when it suited his political rhetoricism, had openly accused Richard III of murdering his nephews; and Johannes Trithemius, a scholar in the service of the Emperor, who at least once in his life invented a source when he needed one to prove a point.

As an ambassador to England Gaguin had met, at least officially, John Morton, the Chancellor, and entered into poetic rivalry with such as Pietro Carmeliano and Bernard André. Later in life he knew and corresponded with the young Erasmus, whose *Education of a Christian Prince* came out in 1516, eagerly awaited by his English friend, Thomas More. More himself was working at that time on his *History of Richard III*, which was never finished and never published, but which could have easily accommodated the picture of the monstrous but nameless tyrant that Erasmus included in his *Education*.

Men like Gaguin, Mancini and Aurelius prided themselves on their truthfulness, their competent selection (!) of didactic political examples from historical events, and their eloquence. We do not know whether they ever sat down over a glass of wine to discuss the iniquities of Richard III, or whether they ever reached any consensus about the truth of all the allegations laid at the English king's door; for them as well as for Erasmus and More, the 'exemplary' story of a thoroughly evil ruler who was conveniently dead and his dynasty replaced by another, was not something they could discard lightly in their search for literary material to support their thesis. Richard III was the dark image that provided the background against which their picture of the ideal prince shone so brightly.

(The information about Aurelius and his chronicle is taken from the detailed study by Karin Tilmans, *Aurelius en de Divisiechroniek van 1517, Historiografie en Humanisme in Holland in de tijd van Erasmus*, Hollandse Studiën 21, Hilversum 1988, which includes an English summary).