

Research Notes and Queries

King Richard's Last Sacrament

Jan Willem Verkaik writes:

In his helpful contribution to *The Ricardian* (vol. 9, no.113, June 1991) 'Was Bosworth worth a mass?' John Wood expressed some doubt concerning the well-known stories told by the author of the Second Crowland Chronicle Continuation and by Henry Parker, Lord Morley, about King Richard's chaplains who were supposed to have failed to celebrate mass on the morning of that fateful August day when Richard lost his crown. Were their accounts based on fact? Wood was not convinced that they were.

What seemed to be lacking, however, from this otherwise excellent exposé, was another example of such a story made up after the event to prove to contemporaries that the defeated commander had not been fighting with God on his side, and which would show historians that the unhappy outcome of a battle could give rise to such tales, irrespective of the truth. Such an example does indeed exist: the Brabantine chronicler Lodewijk van Velthem (*circa* 1315) described in more than 1400 lines the famous battle of Courtrai, fought on 11 July 1302, in which a Flemish army, consisting mainly of weavers, fullers and other common labourers and peasants fighting on foot, defeated the mightiest army in Europe, the chivalry of France. Hundreds of knights, including their commander, Robert, Count of Artois, were killed because the Flemings had decided to take no prisoners. Among other portents of the fate that awaited the proud and self-confident count — his dog, Brune, kept pulling off his armour with its paws and teeth; a toad came crawling out of the Flemish ranks towards the French and spat its venom at them; the count's valuable war-horse, Morel, which had served him well in two earlier battles, inexplicably fell to the ground three times as soon as its master had mounted — van Velthem recounts the following miracle:

Artois wanted to hear mass privately and let his chaplain know that he wished to receive the Lord before he went into battle. The priest promptly read mass, but when it was finished and Artois was about to receive the host, the host had disappeared. This grieved the priest greatly and he said: 'Lord, what has happened to us? I cannot find God's body!' Artois was dismayed but said: 'What I have decided to do today I will bring to an end, come what may. I will receive the Lord some other time, when the battle is over'. And so there could be no hope for him.¹

Other, pro-French, sources also mention Artois hearing mass but record nothing unusual.² The similarity of the story to the one about Richard at Bosworth is remarkable and strengthens the suspicion that here is a mere literary *topos*. Not only the stories told by van Velthem are of doubtful veracity! I think Wood was right: we may well doubt whether it is true that Richard 'was not allowed to see the body of Christ on the last day of his life and died without its comfort'.

1. The Middle Dutch text reads:

Artoys wilde messe horen besonder,/ Ende deet te weten sinen caplaen / Dat hi Gode wilde ontfaen,/ Eer hi vard ten wigeward./ Die priester die las messe ter vard,/ Ende alse messe was gehent,/ Ende alse Artoys soude ontfaen tsacrament,/ So was dit sacrament verloren./ Dies had die pape groten toren / Ende sprac: 'Here! Wats ons gesciet?! Gods lichaem en vindic niet!' / Dies was Artoys te barenteert,/ Endesprac: 'Dat ic heb geordineert,/ Dat salic inden op desen dach,/ Comer mi af dat comen mach! / Ic sal Gode op een andren tijt/ Ontfaen, alse ghent es die strijt.' / Des mach hi sijn al sonder hope.

Leiden, University Library, Ms.B.P.L.14 E, f.47 (b); I. le Long, ed., *Spiegel Historiaal, of Rym-Spiegel* . . . , Amsterdam 1727, p.243; V. Fris, ed., with assistance from W. de Vreese, *De Slag bij Kortrijk*, Ghent 1902, pp.146-7; H. vander Linden et al. eds., *Lodewijk van Velthem's Voortzetting van den Spiegel Historiaal (1248-1316)*, 3 vols., Brussels 1906-38, vol. 2, pp.295-6; W. Waterschoot, ed., *Lodewijk van Velthem. De Guldensporenslag* . . . , The Hague 1979, p.60.

2. L. Delisle and N. de Wailly, eds., *Extraits d'une chronique anonyme intitulée Anciennes Chroniques de Flandre, Recueil des Historiens des Gaules et de la France*, vol. 22, Paris 1865, p.377; H. Moranvillé, ed., *Chronographia regum Francorum*, 3 vols., Paris 1891-7, vol. 1, p.107.

Book Reviews

YORK HOUSE BOOKS 1461-1490. Edited Lorraine C. Attreed. 1991. Alan Sutton Publishing Ltd., Stroud, for the Richard III and Yorkist History Trust, £75. ISBN 0-86299-936-7. Special price to Members of £40 the set, £25 the volume, incl. p. & p. from Miss A. Smith, 14 Lincoln Road, Guildford, Surrey GU2 6TJ. Cheques payable to Richard III Society. Overseas Members to add 10% for postage.

The importance of the late medieval York House Books has long been recognised thanks to the partial edition by Angelo Raine for the Yorkshire Archaeological Society's Record Series. There can be no doubt that Attreed's present and comprehensive modern edition completely supersedes that earlier version. This is a scholarly and thorough transcription of the earliest surviving house books and, in a series of appendices, of closely related material. The edition also contains a very thorough index and a glossary of terms and place names. Given the indifferent state of much of the material the task of transcription can have been no easy matter; Attreed has performed an important service to scholarship.