

## **The Hanged Man: A Story of Miracle, Memory, and Colonialism in the Middle Ages**

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Nora Berend

*The Hanged Man* is a fascinating account of a miracle and its context. Robert Bartlett, a medieval historian well known for his earlier work on ordeal, conquest, the expansion of Europe and the lives of saints, combines his many fields of expertise in order to analyse the story of one man's death and alleged resurrection. Bartlett writes for the wide public, while at the same time maintaining rigorous standards of scholarship. It is the best kind of popular history book, combining a reliance on all the scholarly tools of the historian's craft with a language accessible to the non-specialist. Indeed, the book is one that I would be happy to recommend to undergraduates, interested general readers and medieval historians alike.

The book is based on the story of a Welshman, William Cragh, hanged on the orders of the lord of Gower, William de Briouze. Detailed eyewitness accounts survive of the event, because the evidence was collected and used in the early fourteenth century in the canonisation process of Thomas de Cantilupe, bishop of Hereford: William Cragh, it was claimed, was miraculously brought back to life through the intervention of Thomas de Cantilupe, thus providing proof of Thomas's sanctity. Robert Bartlett uses the story as 'a window on the wider medieval world' (p. xi). He analyses the story of the condemnation and hanging of William, highlighting the contradictions contained in the different accounts. While Lady Mary de Briouze characterised William Cragh as a notorious Welsh brigand, her stepson, William de Briouze junior, described Cragh as a Welsh rebel who participated in the war between the Welsh and King Edward I of England. The witnesses did not agree on the exact date of the hanging either, placing it fifteen to eighteen years before the date of their deposition in 1307. They similarly disagreed over the period it took for William Cragh to recover fully. One crucial contradiction concerned the nature of the miracle. Cragh, according to other witnesses, indicated soon after his miraculous revival that a bishop in white garments had helped him while he was hanging from the gallows. Cragh in front of the questioners denied this; instead, however, he recounted a vision that he had seen before his execution, and his invocation of the saint on the way to execution.

Bartlett describes the inquisitorial process accompanying canonisation: as in all such cases, the witnesses did not offer their testimony spontaneously, but were questioned by the ecclesiastics appointed to gather evidence, according to a questionnaire. This obviously had consequences for shaping the responses of the witnesses. For example, the witnesses gave lengthy detailed descriptions of the hanging and of the dead corpse, as well as of the miraculous resuscitation of the dead body, because it was a key aspect of the canonisation process to establish that the victim could not have survived due to natural causes. Many features of the invocation of saints as well as thanksgiving after a miracle are also described, e.g. measuring the length of the body to make a candle of the same height for the saint, and the journey of thanksgiving to the saint's tomb. The author provides a brief history of the development of canonisation procedures to contextualise the one concerning Thomas de Cantilupe. The analysis of the witnesses' answers in the case of Thomas sheds light on the practical difficulties that could be encountered during the hearings. The key witness, Cragh himself, spoke only Welsh, others used Latin, French and English. Interpreters were needed to interrogate Cragh, and ultimately everyone's deposition was rendered in Latin by the notaries, introducing another degree of separation between the experiences of the witnesses and the accounts as we have them.

Both some of the contradictions and some of the agreements between the testimonies are striking, and Bartlett convincingly argues that the latter may be due to witnesses influencing each other, either at the time of the execution and miraculous revival, or during the journey that some of the witnesses made together before giving their testimonies in 1307. They probably discussed the events of the past and therefore recast many of their experiences in light of the others' memories of these events. Since the time that elapsed between the hanging and resuscitation and the accounts given by the witnesses in front of the three ecclesiastics gathering evidence for Thomas's canonisation was very long, one can easily understand how memories of the events could fade and/or be reformulated in the meantime.

For further context, Robert Bartlett gives a detailed analysis of hanging, a common punishment at the time, as well as of the consequences of such a death in the appearance of the dead body. He also provides a context for the miraculous revival, by using a study on miraculous salvations from hanging that demonstrates a changing trend: before 1100, the majority of those saved were presented as guilty, whereas after that time, at least 60 per cent were presented as innocent. Cragh himself claimed to be innocent of the homicides of which he was accused, while other witnesses disagreed over the issue. Bartlett also points out that Cragh's case was not simply one of miraculous intervention to save the condemned from hanging, but a miraculous resurrection; a type of miracle especially frequent among the miracles attributed to Thomas de Cantilupe and a type that grew more common over the later medieval period.

Interesting evidence is revealed about the society itself: how people measured time, not by counting in years but by the distance of an event from the present, its relation to memorable occasions, and finally by

ecclesiastical feasts to determine the day of the event. Measuring duration was based on the canonical hours and on counting in terms of how long it took to walk a given distance. Subjective ways of measuring time and space prevailed over the use of fixed scales of measurements, although the latter did exist.

The interaction between the key figures in the drama, notably Cragh and William de Briouze, would be impossible to understand without the historical analysis of the social context. Bartlett provides an expert account of what he calls 'colonial Wales' (p. 68–79). Although one might argue about the use of the word 'colonial' for the medieval period, the analysis itself focuses on all the key aspects of the English conquest and its consequences in Wales. The situation in the lordship of Gower, divided administratively between an 'English' and a 'Welsh' part, was particularly complex. The administrative division did not reflect the division of the population, and Welsh continued to live in 'English Gower'. Native Welsh rulers and Marcher lords fought each other for the extension of their own territories, with alliances and hostilities cutting across ethnic lines. In the case of Gower, not only threat from the Welsh, but also disputes about succession between members of the de Briouze family complicated the picture. Edward I's intervention provoked large-scale war and resulted in the creation of the Principality of Wales, a royal dominion. Rhys ap Maredudd, initially an ally of Edward I, rebelled against the king and it was in the course of this rebellion that William Cragh participated in an attack leading to his capture and condemnation.

Bartlett also traces the career of William de Briouze, one of the English Marcher lords in Wales, and of his family. Dedicated royalists, the family's fortunes fluctuated according to the events affecting the king's power in the thirteenth century. William's role in the case of Cragh was one manifestation of the rights of Marcher lords who claimed 'royal jurisdiction' (p. 93) in their domains. Another feature of aristocratic life is also highlighted: litigation within the family for property. In this case, William de Briouze's third wife, Lady Mary, and her stepson were involved in extended litigation over her dower. Lady Mary, the wife of the man who condemned William Cragh to die, and condemned him to a particularly cruel death, stipulating that he be hanged by his own relatives, interceded for Cragh before the execution. It is impossible to know what her motives were, but it is clear that all the male members of the family and the wider entourage thought it was a bad idea to try to rescue Cragh. When she failed to influence her husband, she still continued her efforts to save Cragh, this time by invoking Thomas de Cantilupe, who proved to be more accommodating to Lady Mary's wishes.

The book closes with a chapter on the new saint, Thomas of Cantilupe, and another on the aftermath of the events recounted in the story of Cragh. Thomas's tomb in Hereford Cathedral, to which his remains were moved in 1287, quickly became a focus of pilgrimage. Given the de Briouze family's extensive connections with Hereford Cathedral, it is not surprising that members of the family, and indeed other locals, turned to Thomas for help. The final decision on his canonisation only came in 1320, through the official papal declaration. Clearly, however, many already regarded Thomas as a saint prior to that date. Finally, Robert Bartlett outlines the subsequent careers of the papal appointees who gathered evidence for the canonisation process: William Durand, Ralph Baldock and William de Testa, and of the de Briouze family. The former three continued in prominent positions, often in papal service. The de Briouze family, however, was nearly destroyed due to the ambitions of Hugh Despenser the Younger, Edward II's favourite. Their estates were seized and given to Hugh, leading to a rebellion of the Marcher lords against the king. By an ironic twist of fate, William de Briouze junior's son-in-law, John de Mowbray, who took part in the rebellion, was hanged. His widow and young son eventually regained possession of the de Briouze lands after the Despensers' defeat in 1326.

Robert Bartlett successfully allows 'the voices of many dead men' and women 'to speak again' (p. 142) through his analysis of their depositions at the canonisation process. One condemned man's story is dissected to demonstrate its relevance to topics as disparate as the subjection of the Welsh to the English, medieval saints' cults, and relations within an aristocratic family. This book is an intriguing example of microhistory that encapsulates political, social and religious history alike.

I have few critical observations overall. I found the use of a few terms jarring and anachronistic: racism (p. 73) – although mentioned as not being the cause of certain actions – and ethnic cleansing (p. 74) in particular

do not seem to fit into a medieval context, because no explicit medieval ideologies underpin their existence, although prejudice, ideas of inferiority and mass murder were of course known in the Middle Ages. I would also prefer to restrict the use of 'colonial' to modern history. The analysis of William Durand's role at the Council of Vienne and of his views on crusading is oversimplified. Finally, I was frustrated by the system of references (which was also used in Robert Bartlett's *The Making of Europe*). The text contains no footnote numbers. Instead, at the end of the book, the author provides notes, including references to primary sources, arranged according to the order of the text and signalled by page numbers. This arrangement means that readers do not know whether or not a particular part of the text is footnoted, unless they keep flipping the pages as they read. Although this system is not likely to cause problems for general readers, it is annoying for the academic audience.

Despite these criticisms, I wish to emphasise again that this is a superb book. The story of the hanged man is in itself an excellent one, the kind of story many medievalists would wish to find during the course of their research. The analysis Robert Bartlett provides makes it even more appealing, placing it in such a varied and wide context so effectively. Finally, the author displays another admirable and enviable trait: the book is well written, infused with a dry sense of humour and very enjoyable to read.

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