GRESHAM COLLEGE

12 APRIL 2018

KING HENRY III AND THE COMMUNICATION OF POWER

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The title of this talk may appear problematic, for 'power' is a mutable concept, as Michel Foucault has taught us. There are more fundamental reasons why we might question the terms and assumptions of my title, which imply that Henry III was not only a ruler who did communicate his power, but that he was adept at doing so. There could be very good reasons for doubting this.

A recent biography of King Henry III by American historian Darren Baker has the sub-title, 'The Great King England Never Knew It Had'. An article about the book, which appeared online for BBC History magazine at the end of last year, emphasised the King's 'underrated' reputation. How well could Henry III have communicated his power, we might ask, if so few people today know who he was?

To be clear, it is the latter Henry – Henry of Winchester, the eldest son of King John, and England's fifth-longest reigning monarch, who ruled for fifty-six years between 1216 and 1272 – that forms the focus on this talk. The challenge of identifying Henry III and determining his worth is not a new one, however. Dante, in his *Divine Comedy*, which was written during the first half of the fourteenth century, consigned Henry III to sit in eternal solitude outside the gates of Purgatory. And so, it is that Henry III has long been remembered – if at all – as one of England's witless kings. Rather like Richard II or Charles I, conventional historical narratives suggest that Henry had big ideas but lacked the cash, consensus and political nous to see them realised.

Like King Richard and King Charles, Henry was certainly an aesthete. He initiated the lavish reconstruction of Westminster Abbey, to make it a suitable place of worship for his patron saint Edward the Confessor. He remodelled Winchester Castle, of which the magnificent great hall still remains. Henry's alms giving, which included Maundy distributions of shoes; his commission of costly garments and jewellery, not to mention his detailed specifications for decorative schemes in royal residences – and his recorded impatience when they took too long to realise – testifies to his passion for art and ceremony. But historians frequently suggest that Henry III built big and spent prodigiously because he lacked effective political authority. The role of royal dress, architecture and ceremony during his reign was to provide a façade, an impressive veil, to conceal a character bereft of the qualities that would make him a strong and successful medieval ruler. Henry III's communication of power was little more than smoke and mirrors.

The most damning verdict of Henry III in this regard is that of Professor Nicholas Vincent. Commenting on the relic of Christ's blood that was gifted to Henry in 1247 by the patriarch of Jerusalem, he asserts:

> "The general indifference to Westminster, to the shrine of Edward and to such relics as the Holy Blood, reflects a more deep-rooted indifference towards the King himself, an indifference that bordered upon contempt. As crusader, financier, administrator and as would-be reconqueror of France, Henry fared just as dismally as he did as a patron of relics. The failure of the Holy Blood is to this extent symptomatic of the far wider failure of King Henry III." (*The Holy Blood*, 2001)

Vincent makes his point forcefully, but his argument is not new. Since Bishop Stubbs, who wrote during the nineteenth century, scores of historians have taken an almost perverse delight in demonstrating the eloquence of their diction to berate Henry III's deeds. This makes for a stimulating read or talk, but when the experts perpetuate 'ready-made characterisations' of kings, we are in danger of misunderstanding the past.

In what follows, I want to argue that Henry used art consistently and deliberately throughout his reign. If we are to understand the accomplishments and crises of one of the longest and most tumultuous reigns in our history, which saw the establishment of Magna Carta as a benchmark of good governance; if we want to remember and understand Henry III more fully, we should acknowledge the centrality of art and ceremony in his reign, for this was central to the King's communication of power, even if his efforts were not always successful. I want to make my argument by thinking about a belt, a building and a battle.

The Belt

The belt that I want to talk about was discovered in the early 1940s in the monastery of Santa María de Las Huelgas, Burgos, within the tomb of Fernando de la Cerda, the son and heir of Alfonso X of Castile. The belt is made of a tablet-woven braid decorated with minute blue and white glass beads. It is lined with light green silk brocaded with gold. Two silver-gilt plates are attached to the ends of the strap, one of which serves as the buckle. The plates are decorated with pearls and sapphires and each contains four three-sided shields painted with heraldic devices. The belt strap is divided into twenty equal sections, which are decorated with alternating designs. Ten of the panels feature intricate geometric patterns set within a diamond-shaped frame. The corners of these panels are filled with swastikas and discs. No two panels are identical, but the colour scheme of each is blue and white. The ten remaining panels are filled with three-sided heraldic shields, some of which are copied from the silver-gilt plates. These panels are also depicted in blue and white. In total, the belt features twelve different coats of arms.

Attempts to identify the arms on the shields, and thus the origins of the belt, have caused much debate. Since its discovery over seventy years ago, different arguments have been put forward to suggest that the belt originated in England, France and Spain. In an article that I have written about the belt, I argue that it was English and that it had been commissioned by King Henry III. The belt's journey from England to Spain was circuitous. In 1254, Henry gifted the belt to the count of Champagne, Thibault II, during his first diplomatic visit to France. In 1269, Thibault probably re-gifted the belt to Fernando de la Cerda, at his wedding. The belt's burial with the Castilian Infante provides important evidence of the close familial and political relationships that linked the ruling dynasties of northwest Europe during the thirteenth century. Commissioned as a gift and richly decorated, I suggested that the belt should be seen as an example of the aesthetic accomplishment of Henry III, his use of propaganda and political aspirations.

'Propaganda' is clearly not a medieval term, but I think it is appropriate to use in this context, if we follow the definition favoured by the French medievalist Martin Aurell. He describes propaganda as:

> "[T]he broadcasting of a political message out from [the royal court], and its reception by the periphery, where the aristocracy still had an ability to make up its own mind, an ability the king wanted to influence. It recognised that there was public opinion in the complaisance of the aristocracy, which it was necessary to convince about the good sense of the actions of the king and his officers. 'Propaganda' assumes a sharp consciousness of the role of communication amongst the governing classes, who were intelligently furthering the spread of favourable ideas when they funded professional thinkers, writers and performers. It implies also an infrastructure, however primitive." (*L'Empire des Plantagenêt* (2003)/*The Plantagenet Empire* (2007))

Fernando's belt certainly sought to convince people about 'the good sense of the actions of the king.' It did this by emphasising the convivial relations that existed within the English royal court and between Henry III and his fellow European rulers. The fact that there are only ten shields on the belt strap, some of which are replicated on the silver-gilt plates, implies deliberate selection. The arms of these shields belong to a diverse group of individuals who are not comparable in terms of office, status, age or income. There are conspicuous absences and odd inclusions. In total there are three kings, six earls and two barons. This again would imply deliberate selection. Due to the limits of time, I won't provide a prosopographical overview of the individuals whose arms appear on the belt, but it is apparent that all of the men depicted on the strap were English; many could trace their families back to the Norman Conquest of 1066. In contrast, on the silver gilt plates, the arms of England

appear alongside those of France and Navarre. On the belt strap, Henry is king of England, standing among his barons. On the silver gilt plates he stands among European princes, alongside the saintly Louis IX and Thibault II.

The theme of Englishness on the belt strap was hardly coincidental. The emphasis on individuals who were *de regno Anglie natos* ('born of [the kingdom] of England') coincides with King Henry's efforts to rebrand the monarchy after the death of his father, King John, and the virtual loss of the dynasty's cross-channel kingdom. Unusually for the time, Henry rejected French names for his children and named his sons after Edmund and Edward, canonised English kings. He adopted the last true English monarch before the Conquest, Edward the Confessor, as his patron saint. During the 1250s, when I think the belt was commissioned, an Anglocentric focus was political in other respects. The English court was increasingly concerned, and vocal, about Henry's distribution of patronage to his Lusignan half-brothers. It is striking that these men, so close to king in his counsels, do not appear on the belt at all. The promotion of court allegiances and the image of a king working in concert with his political community was not new, as political ideas rarely are. Henry had explored this theme in art before. In 1243, he commissioned a mural for the great hall of Dublin castle. The painting, which does not survive, depicted the king and queen seated amongst their baronage. The idea of political community was revived between 1259 and 1265, when sixteen heraldic shields were installed along each side of the choir of Westminster Abbey. The three-sided shields, like those on Fernando's belt, contained the arms of England's aristocracy alongside those of the royal family.

The Building

And so we move from the belt to the building that I want to discuss, Westminster Abbey. Henry III's reconstruction of Westminster Abbey began in 1245. Starting with the east end, sections of the existing church, built by Edward the Confessor in the eleventh century, were taken down and new, taller and wider sections of Henry's church were erected in their place. The abbey was conceived to be a suitable space for the tomb of the king's patron saint. But in paying homage to the heavens, Henry also made sure to use the building to enhance his terrestrial authority. The result is a unique piece of architecture that has a perfectly articulated, and quite deliberate, mesh of the secular and sacred. As you enter the abbey through the north transept, your eyes sweep across the intricately carved interior and are drawn upwards to look at the exquisite rose window in the south transept. Between this window and the triforium you notice two figures. The figure who stands to the left has been decapitated, an act of violence perpetrated in the name of Henry VIII during the sixteenth century. The body of this forlorn figure is turned towards another figure on the right, whose right arm is outstretched towards him. This is Edward the Confessor. He is handing his ring to John the Evangelist, disguised as a pauper. This sequence, which was depicted in paint and stone in many royal residences during Henry III's reign, is a central story in Edward the Confessor's hagiography.

The story goes a little like this: One day, after leaving a church service, King Edward was approached by a pauper asking for alms. The King, a proto-Wenceslas, dug deep into his mantle, but had no small change. As a good Christian ruler, Edward was not prepared to allow one of his poor subjects to depart with nothing, so he removed his ring and offered it to the man. The debonair monarch thought no more of his charity, but his deed was to have an awesome consequence. Many years later, two English pilgrims were travelling in the Holy Lands. Walking alone one evening, the men were approached by an elderly man in a hooded cloak. The man asked if the travellers were from England; 'Yes', they replied. He asked if their king was Edward; 'Yes', they replied. Satisfied with their responses, the man instructed the pilgrims to return immediately to their King and Kingdom. He explained that several years earlier, King Edward had given him his ring, thinking him to be a humble peasant. But the King had been wrong. The man threw back his hood and revealed that he was St John the Evangelist. St John said that the pilgrims must return home and inform their King that his death was imminent. The King should have no cause to fear, however, for because of his earlier generosity, St John would personally escort his soul to heaven. The men were to return Edward's ring, as a symbol of the Saint's sincerity.

In the thirteenth century, King Henry III (and later, of course, Richard II) was drawn to this episode because it reminded him, and other onlookers, of his own piety and benevolence. It also implied that Henry's kingship was

sanctioned by heavenly heavyweights in the same way that King Edward's had been. As keen as Henry was to demonstrate his Christian credentials, this was not the only point that he wanted to impress upon visitors as they entered his church. As people walk into the Abbey, they pass under a stone arch. At the apex of this arch, there is a bust of a podgy-faced boy. The figure is not specifically identified, but most historians believe this is probably a representation of the Lord Edward, Henry III's son and successor. As soon as visitors entered Westminster Abbey, the strength of Henry's spiritual and dynastic authority was made apparent. This sophisticated theme was elaborated further in the Abbey's Chapter House, a building upon which Henry lavished much attention.

The Chapter House was a meeting place for the king and his barons. It was therefore an appropriate backdrop from which to project images of royalty. The tone of the room was set by the tiled floor, of which the Latin inscription proclaims:

> *Ut rosa flos florum, sic est domus ista domorum.*
> As the rose is the flower of flowers, so is this the house of houses.

The tiled floor incorporates a diverse mixture of dynastic and religious iconography. The Angevin lions appear sixty-two times alongside stylised impressions of the Abbey's rose window and the figures of King Edward and St John. Henry's household accounts reveal that a golden lectern was designed especially for the room. It is well documented that Henry liked to make speeches and he must have felt that the Chapter House was the ideal location from which to launch one of his most ambitious plans, the acquisition of the kingdom of Sicily for his second son Edmund. To persuade the barons of the necessity of conceding a tax to fund the campaign of conquest, a set of Sicilian coronation robes were commissioned for Edmund to wear in the Chapter House before the assembled meeting. The preparations – and propaganda – were carefully considered, but cash was not forthcoming. Between 1239 and 1266 all of King Henry's requests for taxation were denied.

Today, we have to look carefully within the Abbey for the architectural features that I have discussed, as so many have been hidden or partially destroyed by later decoration. In the thirteenth century, the iridescent colours of the Abbey's carved interior, illuminated by candlelight, would have made them prominent to all visitors.

The 'Battle'

The ability to combine secular and sacred motifs is also a notable feature of the battle, and third example, that I want to think about. The battle is in actual fact a siege, but 'siege' obviously doesn't work within my alliterative scheme. The siege of Kenilworth castle in 1266 lasted for 172 days and it is the longest siege in England's history. Nine months before the siege, on 4 August 1265, royalist forces won a decisive victory at the battle of Evesham. This triumph effectively ended the civil war that had raged in England since the summer of 1263, sparked by disaffection with Henry's personal rule that did not adhere to the principles of Magna Carta. At Evesham, the rebel leader and royal in-law, the Earl of Leicester Simon de Montfort, had been slain and King Henry, a former captive of the earl, regained his freedom. But the royalist victory was not total. Many dissidents remained. Embittered and fearful of the king's decision to seize the lands of suspected rebels, they retreated to Montfort's former stronghold of Kenilworth castle. Symbolically and strategically Kenilworth was situated 'in the middle of the kingdom', as the St Albans monk William of Rishanger perceptively put it. For this very reason Rishanger knew the surrender of the garrison had to be achieved if peace were once again 'to smile upon England'. Writing after Henry's reign, in the fourteenth century, his opinion is particularly apposite.

On arrival at Kenilworth the royal force was split into separate divisions, to surround the castle. The roads and waterways must have heaved with traffic delivering equipment to maintain this enormous war effort. Royal records mention the supply of 60,000 quarrels for crossbows. Some 2,000 wooden hurdles measuring 8x7ft and thicker variants measuring 10x8ft were also sent. The hurdles presumably acted as defensive screens, protecting the royal soldiers from projectiles hurled from within the castle. Heavier siege equipment was also required. In all, nine siege engines were brought to Kenilworth, transported by road and river. The machines were erected

around the castle. Once set-up, they fired stone missiles day and night. The use of wooden siege towers attracted particular comment from chroniclers. One of the Lord Edward's towers, of 'remarkable height and width', contained 200 crossbowman. 'Through skill' the royalists managed to attach the tower to the walls of Kenilworth castle, but their attack was unsuccessful. The tower was struck by a missile, putting it out of action. The King's siege tower, called the 'Bear' 'on account of its great size', fared little better. Barges from Chester, 'to assail the castle by water', were delivered by 'incredible labours', but were repulsed. Plans to undermine the castle walls through ditches and tunnels also failed. The variety of tactics and equipment may be read as a damning indictment of the effectiveness of Henry III's military machine, but for our purposes they reveal how the king regarded victory at Kenilworth as a prerequisite in his bid to restore royal authority.

In part, the King's show of force at Kenilworth was all about bravado. Henry III wanted to demonstrate that his authority was not irrevocably impaired following his fifteenth-month captivity before the battle of Evesham. After Simon de Montfort's grisly death – his neck was skewered by a lance – Henry wanted to ensure that everyone in England knew that he was, once more, the legitimate and unchallenged ruler. This explains why, after the battle of Evesham, Henry had been escorted into the town to a trumpet salute, and why Montfort's dismembered corpse was despatched to various parts of the kingdom as a gruesome warning to lingering insurgents. It may also explain why the royal household provided Henry with a new suit of clothing, making him look every bit the commander-in-chief during the Kenilworth siege. The household accounts describe a gambeson, a military tunic of quilted fabric, complete with dags. Dags were pointed pieces of fabric sewn onto the hem or shoulders of a garment, invariably in a contrasting colour. The tunic was finished with ophreys, gold embroidered decoration around the collar and cuffs. It is curious that Henry had such a garment made for him at this time because the protection afforded by a gambeson was geared to hand combat. It would have been of little direct use during a siege. The annalist of Dunstable priory refers to raids that were launched against the encamped royal army by those inside the castle, and the fact that Henry and his son Edward were forced to arm themselves 'out of fear'. Nonetheless, the physical description of Henry's gambeson suggests it was worn chiefly for its aesthetic effect. Perhaps like Hitler, who longed to exchange his grey military jacket with the brown party one, but refused until the war was won, Henry III wore the gambeson to show his commitment to the various military expeditions of this period, perhaps more specifically the siege. The King had, after all, made a conscious, possibly public, decision to remain at Kenilworth until the siege was over. He did not even return to Westminster Abbey for the feast of his patron saint Edward the Confessor on 13 October, as was his custom. Indeed, during the siege, the king was probably more visible to a larger group of his subjects, and for a longer period of time, than at any other point in his fifty-six year reign.

Sensitive about his image and deeply pious, Henry III seems to have realised that his displays of bellicosity were proving counter-productive in his efforts to persuade the garrison to surrender. Midway through the siege, he therefore tried a different approach. If he could not induce his subjects to yield through displays of force, he seems to have thought, he would win them over with gestures of benevolence. The royal household accounts show that Henry distributed much larger quantities of plate and jewellery from his stores during the period of the Kenilworth siege. The scale of royal oblations, which had fallen during Henry's captivity, also increased after the battle of Evesham and were now of a similar magnitude to the king's personal rule between 1234 and 1258. A surviving alms roll also reveals that one hundred paupers were fed daily during the siege, thus meaning that the King's customary level of almsgiving was maintained. Throughout the siege, foodstuffs for the King's household were supplied by local sheriffs. The daily costs of feeding the household were therefore very low, ranging from eight to fifteen shillings. However, on 15 August Henry celebrated the feast of the Assumption of the Virgin Mary with a large feast, costing a hefty £50. To put this figure in context, an annual income of £15-£20 was deemed sufficient to support the costs of knighthood during the thirteenth century. This was most definitely a slap-up meal. Holding such a feast before the walls of Kenilworth castle mid-siege must have been impressive, which was surely Henry's intention. There was probably also an element of psychological warfare here; tormenting the starving and besieged garrison with the sight and smells of food and merriment.

It is difficult to determine the full impact of Henry's actions at Kenilworth. The incongruity of the king feeding one hundred paupers daily whilst his siege engines hurled missiles continuously at the garrison, must have been striking. What we can say is that the King's actions were not wholly successful. Instead of cowering before the

royal army, the garrison crowed. The siege provides us with one of the more unusual acts of defiance to be recorded during Henry's reign. During the siege, a local surgeon and member of the castle garrison, Philip Porpeis, stood atop the fortress' red sandstone walls to excommunicate the royal soldiers. His action was a direct rebuttal, and copy, of that of the papal legate Ottobuono de Fieschi, whom the King had summoned to Kenilworth, and who had excommunicated the rebels moments before. In wearing a make-shift white cope to pass his sentence of anathema, which ostensibly cast the royal army, the King, and the Legate, from the Catholic Church, Porpeis was engaging in one of the earliest recorded acts of fancy dress costume to be worn as protest. He was also demonstrating, in clamorous fashion, the inability of Henry III to persuade the garrison to relent and to yield.

I have alluded to other occasions when Henry's use of art and ceremony did not always produce the desired effect: notably, when funds were not forthcoming for the Sicilian campaign. It must also be said that the image of cooperation that is depicted on Fernando de la Cerda's belt is somewhat problematic. The odd collection of arms could speak more of divisions within Henry's court than cohesion. Moreover, many of the men whose arms appear on the belt sided against the king when a party of reform swept to power in 1258. But my purpose has not been to argue that Henry III was always successful.

By looking at a belt, a building and a battle, I hope to have shown how Henry III communicated his power during his reign through the use of art and ceremony. Furthermore, his efforts were deliberate and considered and, as such, could be said to constitute a specific approach to royal political discourse during his fifty-six year reign. If we do not acknowledge that art and ceremony played a crucial part in Henrician political strategies, however successful we conclude they were, we are at risk of ending up with an incomplete jigsaw. This point is particularly important because Henry's son and successor, Edward I, used art and ceremony in a way that appears more considered than earlier Angevin rulers, perhaps, as if he had learned something from his father. Father and son were very different monarchs, but Edward's imperial construction at Caernarfon and his imposing black marble tomb, which seems to have taken design cues from the tomb of the legendary King Arthur, suggests Henry III's approach to politics was pursued after his death. This is not surprising. As parliament slowly evolved from an event into an institution during the late-thirteenth and early-fourteenth centuries, England's rulers inevitably sought new means to project a favourable view of royal authority to a greater number of their subjects who now had more involvement in, and direction over, the governance of the realm. Henry III was not always successful, but he did understand the importance of using art and ceremony in his reign to exalt and exculpate royal authority. Consequently, the King's motivations and methods need to recognised more fully if we are to progress beyond 'ready-made characterisations' of Henry III as a God-fearing and ineffectual failure.

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